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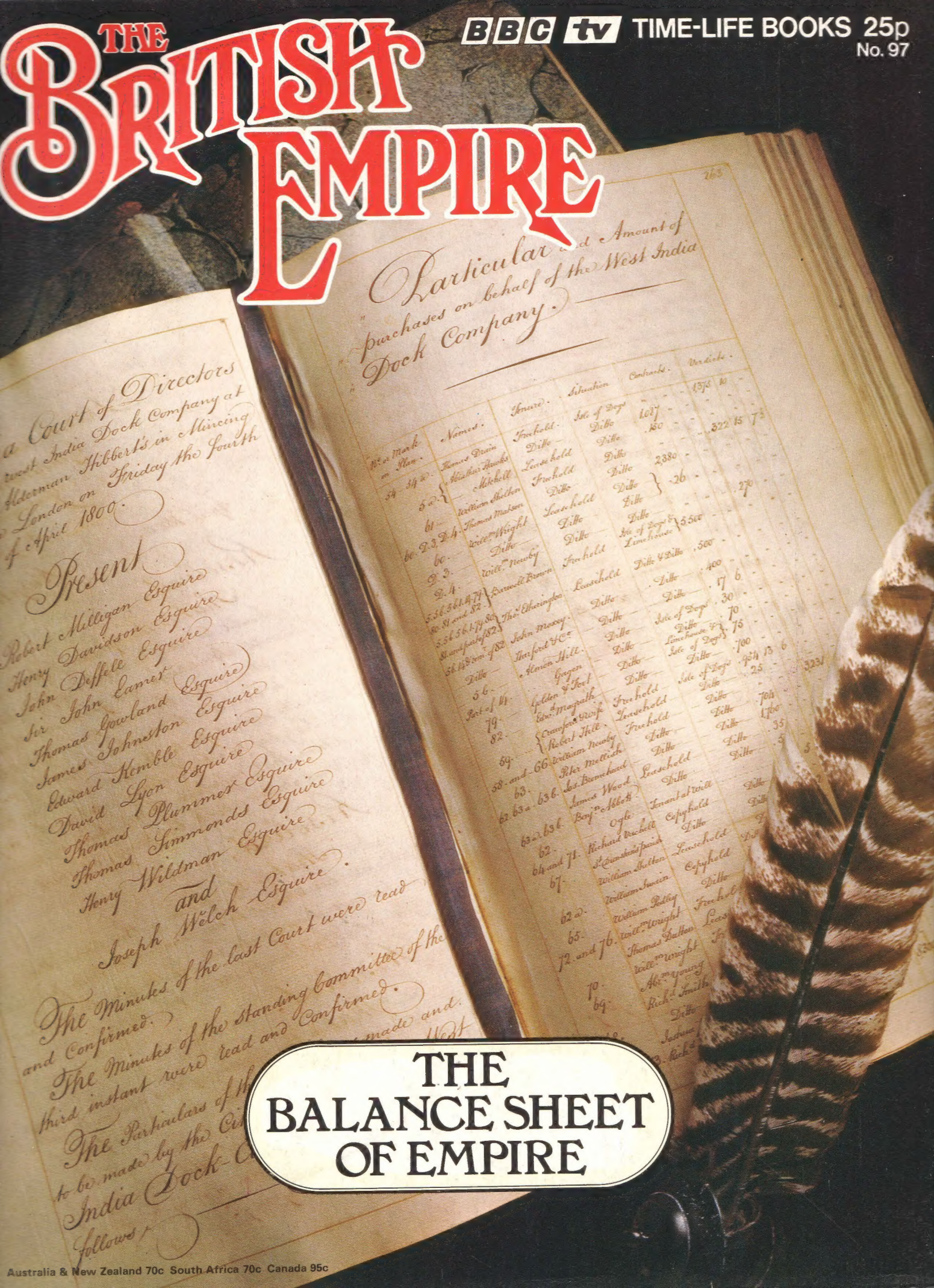
THE BRITISH EMPIRE



THE BALANCE SHEET OF EMPIRE

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THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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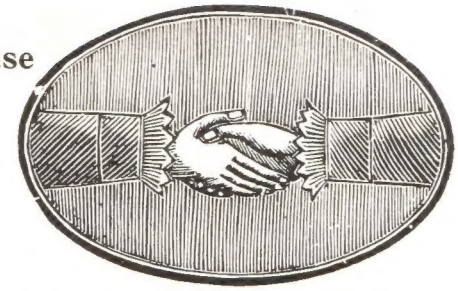
THE BALANCE SHEET OF EMPIRE

Over the past 96 weeks many eminent writers and historians have told the story of the British Empire. They have examined its origins, evolution and decline, debating its cruelties no less than its achievements. But perhaps the most important questions of all persist: Was the gigantic apparatus of imperial administration for the purpose of exploitation or enlightenment? Was the Empire an unsought burden or a hard-won prize? In this final text issue of the series we have invited three distinguished historians to give their answers. D.K. Fieldhouse and A.F.Madden, who have acted as historical consultants to the series, assess the motives and economic consequences of Empire, and A.J.P.Taylor passes his own controversial and forthright judgement on Britain's imperial past

By A.F.Madden and D.K.Fieldhouse



GOVERNORS AND GOVERNED

The act of creating a colony was fundamentally a matter of government. What was the impact of British rule, of British forms of constitutional government, of British officials on newly-established colonies?

There are two very common, and oddly contradictory, illusions about the way in which the British ruled their overseas possessions. First, it is believed that the British intention was to force colonies to adopt precisely the same governmental system as that in Britain: a parliament of two houses with mace and wigged Speaker and all the historical trappings of the British monarchy. Second, at the other extreme, it is asserted that the British denied colonists an elected parliament, cabinet government and political parties, and exercised virtually autocratic power through governors and nominated councils: the system normal in Crown colonies.

It is also alleged that such colonial rule was based on force; that the subject peoples were unwilling to co-operate and from the beginning were bent on securing full independence. In this opening section we want to investigate the truth of these and other assertions and to give a brief account of what did actually happen.

Mr. Podsnap in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* told a French gentleman: "We, Englishmen, are very proud of our constitution, sir. It was bestowed upon us by Providence. No other country is so favoured as this country." Yet despite Podsnap's exclusiveness, it is widely supposed nowadays that British policy has throughout the centuries of imperial rule tried to establish, even to impose, in the colonies a Westminster model irrespective of local wish or circumstances; that the Mother of Parliaments was determined to spawn a brood of little Westminsters and export them overseas. This seems a favourite idea of politicians and schoolmasters. But it is not true.

It is further assumed that two forces have conditioned the evolution of government overseas: that Whitehall's resolute insistence on constitutions made in its own image has been balanced by the colonists' determination to devise their own constitutions in answer to local needs. The fact is that the evolution of forms of government overseas has been continuous and organic, responding to the stimuli of crisis and challenge during a period of some 900 years. As a result, the degree of similarity to the British form of government varies considerably. If a constitution is a vital and responsive creation, it will inevitably be moulded by the ethos of the society it must serve.

It is clear that, except for little more than a decade in the recent history of imperial rule, Westminster had no intention of fostering a brood of Westminster models in the colonies. Indeed, it resisted their establishment and they are mostly the work of expatriate Britons and colonial leaders educated (and conditioned by their reading) in English constitutional law and political theory. Only in the final swift decade of decolonization, when Westminster had no alternative but to accept the situation, did it make a virtue of necessity.

Furthermore, with the Westminster model itself changing so subtly with the years, and with varying styles of government personality and ideology, it would have been quite impossible to export "the perfect image and transcript": even, indeed, to transplant it, so essentially appropriate and organic is it to British society. So when it came to transferring power, the metropolitan government could only secure the best terms possible from colonial leaders and hope that they would be observed in an atmosphere of friendly understanding between two independent governments. This was as true of Australian federation in 1900 and the South Africa Act in 1909 as it was of Ghana in 1957 or Nigeria in 1961.

The other – and paradoxical – criticism is that to indulge her own tyrannical instincts Britain opposed colonial systems of government on the Westminster model. The British, we are told, ruled the majority of their tropical overseas possessions in Africa, the Indies and the East by mere power. By ruthless greed and military might they secured their authority. Not only did they refuse to allow representative forms of government, but they failed to obtain significant voluntary co-operation from their subject peoples.

Such a view, however, is completely distorted. Imperial rule would have been totally impossible without colonial consent and a local supporting cast of one sort or another. The substantial amount of local self-government within imperial rule has often been forgotten. What constitutional machine, even in the 19th Century, could have exercised a central control over the world? How impossible it would have been before the revolution in communications and transport! Nevertheless, imperial rule is often represented as arbitrary, alien, incompetent, unimaginative, and inflexible – the bungling

of a myopic red-tape worm.

According to this view imperial rule was, at best, well meaning, but almost invariably quite out of touch with local needs. In fact, from its very beginning imperial rule had to rely on local men: Irish chiefs, Angevin seneschals, Hindu princes, Malayan sultans and Nigerian emirs. They collaborated for what they saw as their advantages, attempting to manipulate British rule in their own interest against their enemies or rivals.

The methods of indirect rule, whether in pre-Tudor Ireland or Victorian Fiji or Edwardian Nigeria, were dictated partly by the need to work through and with the locals, partly by the need to avoid stirring up too much local resentment, and partly by the lack of imperial funds and administrators. To put the record straight, it is necessary to demonstrate the impossibility of rigid uniformity and to emphasize the considerable amount of local autonomy and diversity tolerated within the Empire.

There is a further misconception. For many centuries the alternative to British colonial rule was not sovereign independence, but dependence on a rival empire. And by the mid-20th Century, when most colonies became formally emancipated, complete independence was no longer possible. The world had shrunk to such an extent that only the super powers might be truly independent.

Within the imperial framework the twin alternatives were a substantial amount of self-government and a proper concern for good government, though these were by no means mutually exclusive. It was, of course, natural that the central authority should regard its right of supervision as a guarantee of good government, and often it could see local problems with more detachment than those who were actually on the spot. It might attempt to curb the land hunger of the frontiersmen, thus averting the danger of bloody retaliation by Red Indians or Bantu. It might endeavour to check the abuse of power by a ruthless majority or a self-interested minority. But in the end, the cry for self-government was inevitably louder and more insistent than that for good government. The colonies could be provided with loans, public works, an even-handed and colour-blind justice, but this would be inadequate. Men soon tire even of good rulers and prefer to be able to change them.

Having disposed of the myths, we can now trace the relationship of governors and governed from the first days of the Elizabethan adventurers to the eve of decolonization to see how in practice the British Empire was governed or went about governing itself.

For convenience, historians have divided the imperial experience into several periods. Neglecting the English mediaeval Empire on the Continent, in Ireland, Man and the Channel Islands, they have spoken of the epoch stretching from the charters to the East India Company and to Virginia at the beginning of the 17th Century until the American Revolution in 1776 as the First British Empire.

In this Empire the Crown moved cautiously for fear of disturbing European rivals. It was too weak to govern directly, so it delegated its powers to individual proprietors (in Maryland and Pennsylvania) or to companies (in Virginia, Massachusetts and the East Indies). The King's governor, a council of colonial notables and an elected assembly were derived, not from the triptych of King, Lords and Commons in the realm itself, but from charters granted in previous centuries to marcher lords in fief or to guilds and merchant adventurers.

But just as the Pilgrim Fathers, arriving in the New World without such a charter or constitution, covenanted together to establish the Mayflower Compact to secure authority and order for themselves, so do-it-yourself Englishmen (and Scots) overseas naturally moulded their institutions to conform with those at home. This was contrary to British intention. Whenever governors aspired to kingly powers, councils to those of the peerage or assemblies to the privileges of the Commons, Westminster was at pains to rebuke them.

Colonists, however, could snap their fingers at a warning delivered a quarter of the world away. Gradually, but effectively, elected representatives in the assemblies claimed and secured more power. The assemblies behaved like a House of Commons. By securing the initiative for and virtual monopoly of taxation they learnt to control governor and council by withholding money. They determined matters of disputed franchise and elections, initiated laws they thought appropriate and asserted their right to freedom of speech.

They claimed as the "rights of trueborn Englishmen" those freedoms they believed were enjoyed at home. They asserted their right to the "laws of England." What they really wanted was the benefit of those British laws that strengthened their own individual position against the Crown, ignoring those laws that strengthened the Crown's power over them. Some statutes made at Westminster did purport to apply to them, notably Acts of trade, shipping, currency and credit. But Westminster did not think it necessary to get colonial agreement to such legislation, assuming its powers to be inherent in the imperial relationship.

As for the colonists, they did not bother unless they were actually inconvenienced. The control which the Crown might exercise was remote and unpredictable so, in practice, the colonists exercised a considerable amount of local self-government and displayed abundant ingenuity in evading edicts of the imperial government. The crisis came in the 1760s when by such measures as the Stamp Act, the Crown in Parliament tried to reorganize, rationalize and reform the machinery of Empire. It is probable that most Americans wanted only an end to controversy and a return to the golden age, and rebellion a decade later was incited only by an active radical minority determined to force Britain into inflammatory actions and to demand terms which Britain could not accept. The idea of a "Commonwealth" free association with separate legislatures in Britain and America under a common, but politically impartial, royal figurehead was impossible under 18th-Century constitutional law. So the Americans fought for and achieved their independence and Britain lost her First Empire.

In the aftermath, Britain learnt several lessons about governing an empire. She never again mistook uniformity for unity. Colonies had to be accepted as they were, not forced into a uniform mould, if empire were to survive. If, in their

adolescence, colonies were treated as subordinates, not potential partners, they would break away. If the traditions of British political evolution were ignored, colonial Britons would establish those liberties for themselves. Concession, if not made in a timely way, would be extorted "by a necessity which shall neither leave us any direction in the form nor any merit in the substance of what we give."

Though the First British Empire had almost entirely consisted of settlements of Britons overseas, there had been considerable diversity between New Englanders and Virginians and between frontiersmen and tide-water gentry. But diversity was most notable in the empire of the East India Company. Long before the loss of the Americas there had been a shift in interest towards an empire, not of settlements, but of small trading posts in the Indian and Pacific oceans. Not least among the reasons for this swing to the East was irritation with the tedious problems of governing unruly Britons in America. The East India Company had made a certain amount of slow, if hesitant, progress by the mid-18th Century and, provided it did not expand its possessions or become bankrupt, it was safe from government interference.

But the collapse of the Mughal Empire left a power vacuum, and wars against the French in the Carnatic region of southern India drew the Company into a more active involvement in Indian politics. With Clive's victory at Plassey the Company became the dominant power in Hindustan, with the additional responsibility laid on it by the Emperor in 1765, of tax-collecting. These activities raised important questions for the Crown. Could a Company be permitted to govern such vast areas? Should the Crown take over direct control or merely exercise greater supervision? The Crown tried quarter-measures in 1773, half-measures in 1784. The dual control of Government and Company envisaged by Pitt's Act of 1784 was not efficient, but it persisted till the Mutiny in 1857. Within India another dualism emerged between British India, directly governed by an expatriate service, and princely India, indirectly governed through British advisers.

American independence was followed, rather surprisingly, considering the disillusion with colonies, by a Second British Empire. Acquired, according to the Victorian historian, John Seeley, "in a fit of absence of mind," it emerged on the one hand as a diversity of small conquered territories, bagged mainly for strategic reasons and put into the deep-freeze of trusteeship in deference to humanitarianism, economy and quietude; and, on the other, of certain countries which attracted substantial European settler populations. Of these, Canada was the pioneer and pacemaker, evolving a form of internal self-government that owed much to British constitutional practice. In the Cape Colony, Trinidad and India, local men also gradually assumed the responsibilities and privileges of government, since this was much cheaper than manning every post with British expatriates. It was also less disturbing to local pride and sensibility.

In the 19th Century a division occurred between the tropical dependencies and the European settlements which in time was to separate the authoritarian from the democratic forms of British imperial government. At the start this was not intentional. It just happened, becoming fixed by administrative routine. There is evidence that the West Indies was to receive a wide representative franchise once the slaves were free men. But after 1833 it was accepted that the free, but politically weak had to be protected against the machinations of the politically sophisticated planters.

The paternalism of Crown Colony government persisted, deprived of the more positive and dynamic features a 20th-Century interventionist state would consider within its responsibilities. Again, there is evidence that men in the 1830s believed the days of the British Raj in India were numbered in years rather than decades. Closer acquaintance with the complexities of the task and the complications of caste and creed in Indian society lengthened the shadows while the day-to-day administrative routine caused devoted civil servants to postpone or forget the goal in meeting successive challenges and crises.

Lord Macaulay declared that "the proudest day in English history" would be when the trust of educating Indians in the institution of self-government had been fulfilled and Britain could quit India. But the process of education proved long. It was natural for Victorians to assume that responsibility was the privilege and duty of the educated. Only compare the slow increase of the electorate in the Reform Bills in Britain and it will be seen that the reluctance to relinquish political power has little to do with race or colour. It seemed that Macaulay and others had underestimated the tasks ahead.

By trial and error the British sought to balance authority and justice, the claims of effective rule with those of humanity. So rule in India and the Crown Colonies, whether white, brown or black, was exercised at first by a British governor with an advisory council and then with a single legislature of officials and unofficials nominated to represent interests, influences, religions, castes or tribes. Only in the last stage were elected members gradually introduced.

Out of ignorance or optimism, critics in Britain and "home-rule" leaders in the colonies tended to underestimate the complexities, insisting that the pace towards representative parliamentary democracy was too slow. Yet, in justifying the one-party politics or military rule in newly-independent states, critics of empire now assert the irrelevance of parliamentary forms.

Nationalist leaders like Nkrumah, while protesting a hallowed doctrine of "one man, one vote" have seen to it that it is used only *once* – to put them in power. Since few colonies in tropical Africa had come under British rule before the end of the 19th Century, and then only in the benevolent despotic form of Crown Colony government, the habit of democratic procedures could hardly have been communicated and may be wholly inappropriate.

The most important, and even surprising, development of the Second British Empire in the settled colonies was that of responsible self-government. In the past, British colonies in America, with their representative institutions, had enjoyed, in practice, a considerable degree of autonomy. But while, in theory at least,

the assemblies voted taxes and made laws, they did not control the executive. This was the pattern of government the Americans chose to perpetuate and enshrine in their constitution once they were independent. Moreover, as long as the King maintained an effective share of government in Britain, appointed his ministers largely at will, provided them with a parliamentary majority and exercised control over their policies, it would have been unthinkable for a colonial governor to delegate his exclusive rights to a "cabinet" of colonists who, in turn, depended on a colonial assembly for their political support.

Even after the main features of a cabinet system were crystallizing in mid-19th-Century Britain, there was still doubt about how a governor, as agent for the Crown and British government, could share his responsibility with colonial ministers who had other masters in the local legislature and in an electorate much wider and inclusive than that of Britain.

But the case for devolving maximum authority to the colonists had the support of many in Britain who saw colonies as a heavy drain upon the mother-country and who wanted a stern rein on public expenditure. A self-governing colony, they reckoned, would cost less to administer and defend than one under close imperial supervision. The doctrines advanced in Lord Durham's 1839 report on Canada recommending responsible government became a manifesto both for free traders who wished to get rid of imperial restraints and for colonial reformers who sought to modify them.

Durham argued that Britain could only avoid colonial troubles if she recognized that local colonial affairs were of no concern to the metropolis. If colonists misgoverned themselves, they would be the only sufferers and the remedy for that was the right to change their ministers. Imperial interest, nevertheless, was still bound up in the external trade, defence and foreign relations of the colonies and the Crown, Cabinet and Parliament must, in terms of international law, remain responsible for them.

During the half-century following the Durham Report, there were three main developments in the context of the settled colonies. First, any colony which had sufficient free European settlers to run a government efficiently might claim and get internal self-government. Indeed, the British enthusiasm for thrift might force responsibility on reluctant settlers, even against their inclinations or calculations. If the settlers seemed to qualify in stability, property and education they must relieve Britain of their local burdens. Furthermore, in order to establish larger and more stable units which could take over these responsibilities, Britain gave encouragement to local initiatives for wider unions in Canadian, Australian, South African and Caribbean federations.

Second, Durham's proposal to keep the colonies' external affairs in British hands became the target of colonial nationalism. One by one colonies secured power over tariffs, commercial treaties and local defence. Representatives even began to appear at international gatherings. Third, with the tide flowing strongly in the direction of colonial autonomy, some began to wonder about the nature of any continuing imperial association in terms of mutual defence, tariff preference, or even (among a lunatic fringe) of imperial federation. But as events proved only too clearly, none of these dreams had the slightest chance of being realized.

A Third Empire followed at the turn of the 20th Century. The self-governing colonies in Canada, South Africa and Australasia had now moved in a process of routine evolution from representative to responsible government and had rounded out their powers of internal autonomy. They were now called "the Dominions," a word borrowed from the pacemaker Canada to distinguish them from the Crown Colonies. Although the Dominions accepted that their independence related to internal government only, they aspired to equality of status with the United Kingdom in international affairs, too.

Participation in the First World War stimulated their nationalism and their self-assertion, and the Statute of Westminster in 1931 confirmed their sovereign power. But like the pigs in *Animal Farm* some were more equal than others and it was clear that though they enjoyed nominal equality with the United Kingdom, they were not equal to her in power and function. They lacked the expertise and personnel to make their own foreign policy, and this was still largely dictated by Britain until the Second World War.

For most of the period during which the old "white Dominions" were evolving their forms of self-rule, the bulk of British subjects and protected persons overseas continued to be ruled by the system of Crown Colony government. Until the 1930s there was no clear view when (if ever) all these colonies would cross the starting-line and begin their own evolution into full membership of the new Commonwealth.

What was the justification for continuing such autocratic government once Britain herself had achieved fully democratic majority rule by the late 1920s? How far and why did non-white peoples co-operate with their British overlords? In most Crown-ruled territories it was for a long time impracticable to share power responsibly with the subject peoples. The tribal societies of tropical Africa were accustomed to managing their own affairs within very small communities, but were illiterate and ignorant of European ways and laws, and were for the most part without experience of a European form of government. They could not have been taken suddenly into full partnership and been given a share in running the complicated apparatus of a modern state.

In time, a vociferous minority of educated, or half-educated, urban natives emerged – in India long before anywhere else – demanding a share in government. Doubts about whether it would be "just" to the rest of the population to hand power over to this minority with whom they now had as little in common as with their European administrators; whether it would not mean the tyranny of a self-seeking élite; or whether the British official could not provide better and more impartial government until the masses should, as Macaulay hoped, be capable of judging what was best in their own interests, were the main justifications for continuing autocratic rule into the post-war epoch: justifications that were thrashed out in endless debate during the late imperial period.

Such rule had to end some time, but there was little enough evidence, even in the 1950s, that many of the colonies to be liberated in the next decade would be better governed or better off after independence. And as events showed, government in many of the new states was more rather than less autocratic than it had been under British overlordship. But the British recognized that imperial rule no longer had local consent or world support. Decolonization was an act of resignation and of anxious faith. The British knew that in the long run self-government would be preferred to good government, and in accepting the fact of independence they had learned, as in South Africa, that though they might not approve, they could no longer interfere.

But although the British had for so long refused to hand over control of central government and the ultimate responsibility for law and order, they did in many ways allow and encourage self-rule at local levels. Not least as a training ground in political education. But this they had to do because they could never have governed remote and diverse territories without native allies and agents. How such assistance was used varied according to circumstances.

In much of West Africa the British bolstered up the authority of the chiefs, creating them even where they did not already exist. These "native authorities," as the colonial administrator Lord Lugard called them, provided most of the government with which ordinary people ever came into contact. In Malaya it was the sultans whose authority was, in principle, at least, maintained; in India it was the princes, and in the Middle East, the indigenous rulers of the many petty Arab sheikdoms. Even where British rule was more direct, as in East and Central Africa, there was always a host of non-European middlemen between the tiny group of British officials at the top and the mass of the population. In this sense, all British colonies were largely self-administering even if not self-governing.

Ultimately, British rule depended on the consent, or at least the sufferance, of the governed. It has suited nationalists in the ex-colonies to assert that this never existed; that empire was based on mere force. But this is self-evidently nonsense. Not all subject peoples welcomed British rule in the beginning (though some, like the Fijians, persistently pleaded for it) but almost all learned to live with it and use it. However, though there were periods when the more intelligent natives felt positively enthusiastic for all that British rule stood for and provided, this feeling turned sour when the educated minority felt they were denied the highest honours in their own society. They then made it their business to convince the contented masses that what they had taken to be British benevolence was, in fact, tyranny. Because they were better able to influence the minds of their compatriots than the alien British, imperial rule eventually lost its appeal. Once that happened and there was no general consent or local co-operation, empire itself became impractical.

What were the aims and benefits of British government and law? First of all, the concept of a clear authority, not dependent upon class, caste or creed. Constitutional legitimacy flowed from the Crown to its advisers and councillors, to its governers and officials overseas in a descending hierarchy, and methods of supervision and channels for grievance and appeal were fixed and known. Those who did not recognize such limits upon the exercise of power, whether Indian princes, British governors or high-ranking soldiers, knew they would be reproved, repudiated and recalled.

British rule guaranteed a separation of powers, especially of executive and judiciary. The law and those who practised it acted not as instruments of government, but as vigilant and impartial defenders of individual rights against arbitrary government. Guardianship by the law is as much a feature of Indian as of Canadian history during the past 150 years. British rule might reasonably claim to have been founded on the principle that liberty was the luxury of self-discipline – though this particular principle was, perhaps, too soon forgotten when eventually British rule came to an end.

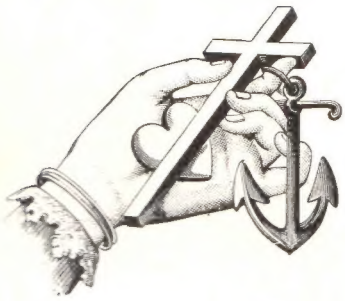
Although government itself was certainly not always high principled and scrupulous, incorruptibility did become a vital standard of British government in later centuries. Again, this principle has not been universally adopted by the newly-independent states.

British governments, by contrast with many others (especially in Asia or Africa) did concern themselves with the rights of individuals and minorities. The British were naturally accused, when supporting the weak, of "dividing and ruling," and they were not entirely innocent of this. But they did not create the divisions in caste, tribe or religion as is sometimes alleged. Moreover, the British, from the first, set their face against a first- and second-class citizenship.

"Conquered inhabitants," said the Lord Chief Justice in 1774, "once received into the conquerer's protection become subjects and are universally to be considered in that light, not as enemies or aliens. . . . An Englishman has no privilege distinct from the natives while he continues there." There was in law, then, no superior race of conquerers.

In the period of decolonization, British concern for the fate of minorities was often a deep-rooted and genuine cause for delaying a transfer of responsibility. Unfortunately, too little has remained in the newly-independent states of the British habit for constitutional government and respect for a legal framework in which debate and opposition can be tolerated. India may be an honourable exception, but India suffered the benefits of the British yoke for far longer than any African colony.

Finally, since British Common Law emphasized individual responsibility for oneself and one's property, tribal landholding with its communal features, in New Zealand and Africa, appeared not only strange to settlers and officials, but seemed also to be an obstacle to the revered principle of "progress." Individual responsibility, it was felt, would help develop the habits of self-reliance, thrift, steady work and moral fibre, which seemed desirable qualities to the representatives of European civilization



THE CIVILIZING MISSION

Many ardent and devoted Englishmen espoused the imperial cause as a means of spreading Christian values to the unenlightened. In some parts of the Empire they fought a losing battle; in others, they were remarkably successful.

At a time of expanding Christendom, the earliest advocates of imperial expansion naturally professed that the extension of God's kingdom on earth was a worthy motive of empire. Though common form, such feeling was genuine. On closer acquaintance, however, with the degrading morals and rites of primitive peoples, concern for their salvation turned easily to indignation. In New England, the Puritans, armed with Old Testament invective, were stung to seek the destruction of the native Philistines. Only in a very few places, such as Williamsburg, were educational institutions set up for the rescue and rehabilitation of the Indians. Elsewhere, the maxim that the "only good injun is a dead injun" became the creed of the hardy frontiersmen.

The Evangelical Revival at the end of the 18th Century, however, spurred the missionary effort. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, boasted that the world was his parish and many devoted missionaries were anxious to carry their faith, even at the expense of their lives, to the heathen. This Christian impulse provided the leadership, if not the final argument for the abolition of the slave-trade and the emancipation of the slaves. After these successes, Evangelicals turned their attention to the European powers' treatment of Aborigines.

A report by a Parliamentary Select Committee in 1837, reviewing the tragic and criminal results of European contact with native peoples, asserted that imperial possessions were given by God "for some higher purpose than commercial prosperity and military renown." It also declared that no scheme for colonization "which implies violence or fraud" would be tolerated and that Britain's imperial mission was to carry civilization, humanity, peace, good government and, above all, the knowledge of the true God to the ends of the earth.

Natives were thus to be protected by special officials and defended from long contracts for service which might prove to be a new form of slavery. Their lands were to be preserved from land-developers, by sale only through the Crown, and no new territories were to be annexed, save by Act of Parliament. Crimes by British subjects against natives were to be more strictly punished, while crimes by natives against British law were to be tried with "the utmost indulgence compatible with a due regard for the lives and properties of others." Missionary work was to be encouraged and treaties with native peoples discouraged in case ruthless Europeans took advantage of the natives' ignorance of legal ambiguities.

It is true British settlers, particularly those in remote areas, did not always follow such a code of conduct. But the Evangelical missionaries showed that native peoples possessed rights that had to be respected in the interest not only of humanity, but also of imperial peace. These Evangelicals invested the Colonial Office, Parliament and the Press with a strong tradition of vigilance and a readiness to denounce repression and to seek redress. The lessons they taught were never unlearned and it is significant that when other imperial powers – without such a humanitarian tradition – first joined in the colonial game, their initial impact was often marked by brutal atrocities. The production of rubber, for example, in King Leopold II's Congo Free State was a notoriously shameful operation. Exploitation was untempered by a respect for man or law, and even though the crimes were mainly those of African overseers, the fault lay in the lack of Belgian discipline and supervision.

In the British parliamentary debate on India in 1773, Edmund Burke declared that "all political power which is set over men . . . ought to be . . . exercised ultimately for their benefit" and that the imperial government was "in the strictest sense a trust . . . to be rendered accountable and even totally to cease when it substantially varied from the purpose for which it could have a lawful existence." But, whatever their good intentions, British politicians, officials and missionaries were not wholly sure how that trusteeship could be fulfilled. They were reasonably sure about their aims – to give, especially in the case of Africa, in recompense for the evils of slavery, the undoubted benefits of Christianity and civilization.

They were, however, often divided on the ways and means of granting such benefits, and were faced with basic questions of policy. Was Christianity the religion of the civilized or a way to civilization? Which should come first? If one accepted the brotherhood of men, did it mean assimilating both the civilized and uncivilized at the risk of jeopardizing

the safety of any weaker group?

Men in earlier centuries with less technological power might have been readier to accept the differences the 19th-Century imperialists found and certainly the force of their impact would have been much less. Even missionaries might have tried to graft Christian principles on to an indigenous root instead of regarding the destruction of native cults as a necessary blow against the Devil's handiwork.

The spread of Christianity and the propagation among the native peoples of the advantages of British education, crafts and techniques went together. Iron-Age artefacts had an immediate attraction for Stone-Age man. Guns also spoke louder than arrows. Contact with the white man gave prestige, and the more ambitious among the new subject peoples saw opportunities in imitating him, in learning his knowledge, and in acting as his subordinate. British administrators and missionaries, in turn, regarded it as their duty to civilize: to eradicate slavery, infanticide, cannibalism and tribal warfare; to communicate "industry, humanity and progress" and, in the words of Burke, to promote "the wealth, the number and the happiness of the human race."

To a generation that believed in progress, it came to seem a deprivation not to provide the aspiring native with opportunities of becoming educated in British methods and standards. David Livingstone's appeal to the British congregations to dispatch Christianity and commerce to the dark corners of the earth was sincere and honest. In India, of course, ancient and powerful cultures could in part withstand the fundamental assault of European civilization. Though Christianity made comparatively little advance in India, Christian principles did permeate Hindu thinking. Mahatma Gandhi, in his fight for Indian independence, fashioned an ideology of passive resistance out of both Christian and Hindu principles. This practice of non-violence, moreover, which would have been useless against other imperial powers such as Portugal, did have some effect against the British Raj.

At the end of the First World War, when anthropologists questioned the superiority of British and European culture and international thinking condemned "exploitation," British self-confidence in the civilizing mission faltered. Imperial sentiment, never widely felt in Britain, ebbed away. In discussions on culture and art, freak views were aired. Ochre daubs on a devil mask or a warrior's face were considered more valid than the Ravenna mosaics; crude montages by pop artists or finger-paintings by primitive children were looked on as being more "meaningful" than collections in the Louvre or Uffizi art galleries; while the circumcision rites of Kenyan girls were regarded as more "relevant" than the coming-out balls of European débutantes. Albert Camus, the French novelist and playwright, called this turnabout of views a "curious reversal, peculiar to our age." It was, as he said, innocence – not crime – that was called upon to justify itself. Increasingly, only black racism has become tolerated, and in masochistic atonement Western European civilization is expected to grovel abjectly.

But even in the days when it seemed natural "recompense" to send abroad the Gospel of Christ and the civilization of 19th-Century Britain, there were those who doubted whether these were wise exports. In 1860 the great pro-consul, Lord Elgin, feared that in China Britain might call down upon herself God's curse for destroying the civilization of another weak Eastern people and this would show "how hollow and superficial are civilization and Christianity" in the forms actually exported.

There were also cynics like Rhodes who spoke of "philanthropy plus 5 per cent." But "legitimate" trade seemed a necessary device in West and East Africa to drive out the "illegitimate" trade in slaves and to fill the ensuing gap in commerce. In West Africa, indeed, the British government had to pay annual grants to chiefs who had signed treaties against slave-trading but needed time to make the necessary adjustments to their economies. There were wits at the time who saw the double-pronged attack on savagery as comic. As the Reverend Sidney Smith remarked, remembering the missionaries' campaign to make their converts dress more decorously: "The savage no sooner becomes aware of his nakedness than the loom is ready to clothe him."

IMPERIAL MARKET PLACE

The Empire has been lauded as an invaluable asset and condemned as a crippling liability. Neither view is accurate.

From the earliest days of 16th-Century English colonization in America and Asia until its final phase in the 1950s, people have regarded the Empire as a commercial asset to Britain. Over 350 years ago the geographer, Hakluyt, argued that colonies would stimulate English trade and strengthen the merchant marine, while the post-war Labour government saw tropical Africa as a source of desperately needed raw materials. During the intervening centuries, generation after generation, adapting its arguments to fashionable economic theories – bullionism, mercantilism, free trade, protectionism, imperial self-sufficiency – used account-book language to measure the reward of ruling other people.

Out of the long debate emerged a general consensus: Empire made Britain richer and her colonies poorer than they would otherwise have been. The end of Empire therefore meant economic loss to Britain but it enabled her colonies at last to taste the full fruits of their own labours. The popular assumption now is that Empire was an evil machine for exploiting dependent peoples by extracting fat profits. This has a new corollary: that states, newly freed from so harsh a yoke, have a moral claim to be compensated for what they claim were their losses.

That such are common articles of faith does not prove them to be true and in our efforts to unravel the reasons for imperial expansion we must not confuse the arguments used to justify (or excuse) that expansion with what happened or how it happened. First, let us look at the enthusiasts of expansion – the promoters – most of whom stayed at home and sent others to do their work. With an incorrigible and irrepressible optimism all of them, from Hakluyt to Rhodes, were seeking interest, support and capital for their ventures. They naturally tended to oversell their schemes, claiming that new markets, new products, new fisheries, new lands, new prisons, new bases would strengthen the power of the realm.

We should not, therefore, be deceived into accepting their brochures as gospel truth or their dreams as realities. Relatively few of their schemes succeeded; most struggled on for a while and then collapsed. Colonial ventures were just as likely to consume and scatter power and wealth as to generate them. No British government has ever planned the expansion of its imperial frontiers; this has been fortuitous and largely irrelevant to British interests. It was the activities of enthusiasts, far beyond control on a distant frontier, that provided the home government with fresh spheres of influence – and the responsibilities and expense that went with them.

Since a repudiation of fresh burdens would have been a confession of weakness, the home government usually shouldered them, making the best of being "pushed." Its justification was handy, automatic: "The country needs it" or, in later periods: "Opinion demands it." The rousing political speeches, the imperial dreaming, the flag-wagging was not the *cause* of expansion, but the *excuse* for it.

Watching the trend of events, the theorists began to move in, explaining the motives of the "imperialism" they thought they had observed. Imperial expansion, we are told, is an expression of nationalism, of pride and of power, or of over-reaction to the needs of security; a hunger for virgin lands or better jobs; an outlet for the export of surplus capital; an expression of the desire to dominate, enslave and exploit the weak.

But all these alleged reasons are so partial and discontinuous as to offer no general explanation either of the phenomenon of empire or of the untidy sequence of events that led to annexations. The mere fact of a weak independent state becoming a weak dependent colony did not make it more valuable to Britain: indeed, Britain had to provide administrators and meet the cost of administration, defence, law and order, subsidies, bounties, loans and grants-in-aid.

British investors obtained only marginally higher return on colonial than on domestic stock and earned better returns on foreign holdings.

But all this begs several vital questions. Were no colonies ever founded with the deliberate aim of making Britain richer? Did Britain really make no profits at the expense of her colonies? And did the colonies suffer no disadvantages because of British control? These are big questions and cannot be fully answered here. But it is possible to do some judicious probing and, above all, to dissect the flat two-dimensional assertion that the British Empire necessarily meant exploitation of the subject peoples.

The argument will have three parts. First, we shall investigate what is meant

by an "imperial economy" and how this was thought of at different periods. Next, we shall survey the various devices actually used at various times to create an imperial economy. Finally, we shall consider the most difficult question of all – who gained and who lost from the economics of the British Empire.

The root idea of most theories of economic imperialism is that to establish a colony or plant a British flag in a tropical territory was to some degree to isolate that place from the rest of the world. Empire was seen as a "ring fence" within which it was possible to create a special economic system to meet the needs of all within its boundaries, forcing certain types of growth that might wither if exposed to the cold air of the world economy. This was certainly the idea of Englishmen in the 17th Century and it lasted until well into the 19th Century. Revived again in the 1930s, it remained the basis of British policy up to the end of decolonization in the 1960s. There was, however, a break in continuity from about 1850 to 1932, effectively dividing British economic imperialism into three distinct sections.

It was Adam Smith, founder of modern economic theory, who, in 1776, labelled the original body of ideas and practices associated with an imperial economy, "mercantilist." The word remains both an historical label and a term of abuse. Mercantile means concerned with trade and Smith's view was that the British Empire was run by and for British traders rather than in the general interest of the British nation or its colonies.

The Navigation Acts were at the heart of the imperial economy. Although they had originally been intended to stimulate a large merchant marine with a monopoly of the carrying trade to and from the colonies, later Acts concentrated more on the economic advantages to be obtained from controlling the source and destination of goods carried both ways. No foreign ship might call at a colonial port or carry goods between Britain and an overseas possession; all European and Asian exports to colonial America had to be transhipped at an English port; most colonial exports had first to be sent to an English port, even if they were destined to be sold in Hamburg, St. Petersburg or other continental markets.

This meant that although the colonies could buy non-British goods – and did so in large quantities – these were more expensive than comparable British products because of the additional cost of routing them via a British port. It also meant that British merchants, insurance firms and ship-owners made a guaranteed middleman profit for their services. Conversely, although many colonial products – tobacco, sugar, timber, rice – were eventually sold in Europe, the British middleman again took his cut as the goods passed via Britain. Thus the American producer received less for his efforts than he might have done had he been free to send his goods direct to their final destination. Here were grounds for saying that Britain exploited her colonies.

Other mercantilist devices made less impact. Britain limited the manufacture and forbade the export of beaver hats, woollens and iron and steel from the colonies to prevent competition with her own manufacturers. Had the list been extended and the American Empire survived longer, this might have become a serious colonial grievance. But by 1783 the colonies were still mainly agricultural societies and few of their infant industries were capable of competing in third markets with British rivals.

Currency control was, in theory, another aspect of the imperial economy, and here the British were inconsistent and generally unsuccessful. They tried to make the pound sterling the universal currency of the Empire, mainly so that debts to British merchants and taxes payable to the Crown would be rendered at a uniform rate. On the other hand, because they refused to provide colonies with a much-needed supply of coins, on the grounds that this would mean loss of their own vital stock of bullion, it was never practicable to establish a proper sterling currency in America.

All these measures were deliberately intended to make the colonies as useful as possible to Britain. There were, however, two practices that benefited the colonies as well as Britain. First, the British paid "bounties" on the sale of certain colonial products, notably indigo, timber and lumber. These were intended to encourage production of commodities Britain would otherwise have had to buy elsewhere, and at the same time to reduce the amount of bullion exported to Europe. But, equally, the bounties provided higher profits for colonial producers.

Secondly, there were preferential tariffs which also cut both ways. Although a few foreign imports to the colonies paid a higher duty than British goods, it was for the most part colonial exports that benefited from a preferential tariff when entering Britain. By the mid-18th Century the colonies were exploiting Britain by monopoly prices when Britons might buy cheaper elsewhere.

There is no doubt that mercantilism was thought by most in Britain and the colonies to be a one-sided system, providing the mother-country with a special reward for her role as founder and protector of the Empire. The first era of mercantilism gradually came to an end between 1820 and the 1850s, not because of complaints from the colonies but mainly because the British had become convinced that the system no longer served their own interests.

Once the American colonies had become independent in 1783, the imperial economy had lost its main assets. The new and remaining colonies were mostly poor, offering limited markets, and Britain was by then increasingly able, with her mechanized industries, to compete in more promising markets. By the 1820s the British public was ready to be convinced that Adam Smith had been right: mercantilism might fill the pockets of the merchants, but it made everyone else poorer because monopoly was against the interests of producers and consumers alike. By 1850 the Navigation Acts had been repealed along with all restrictions on colonial production, bounties and preferential tariffs. Ten years later Britain wound up the last preferences on colonial imports. To many it seemed that with the end of mercantilism the main economic purpose of the British Empire had disappeared and that Empire itself would soon be wound up.

In the following 80 years, the British Empire was open to free trade, with no formal rules or restrictions to distinguish the patterns of colonial trade from those

of any independent state. Yet, for the colonies free trade made remarkably little difference. Britain herself was the centre of world trade and of capital for investment until well into the 20th Century. Until the latter part of the 19th Century she was also the world's leading manufacturer and ship-owner.

Colonies which exported raw materials found Britain their best market. Colonies which wanted to build railways, ports, canals or anything they were unable to afford from current revenue, borrowed the capital required on the London money-market. Colonies which had few industries in the early stage of economic development bought their imports, whether British-made or not, more simply and cheaply through British merchants. Finally, colonies with large overseas trade found that British-built and British-owned ships were the cheapest carriers of their trade to any part of the world. Britain thus remained the natural economic centre of her Empire by virtue of her economic predominance.

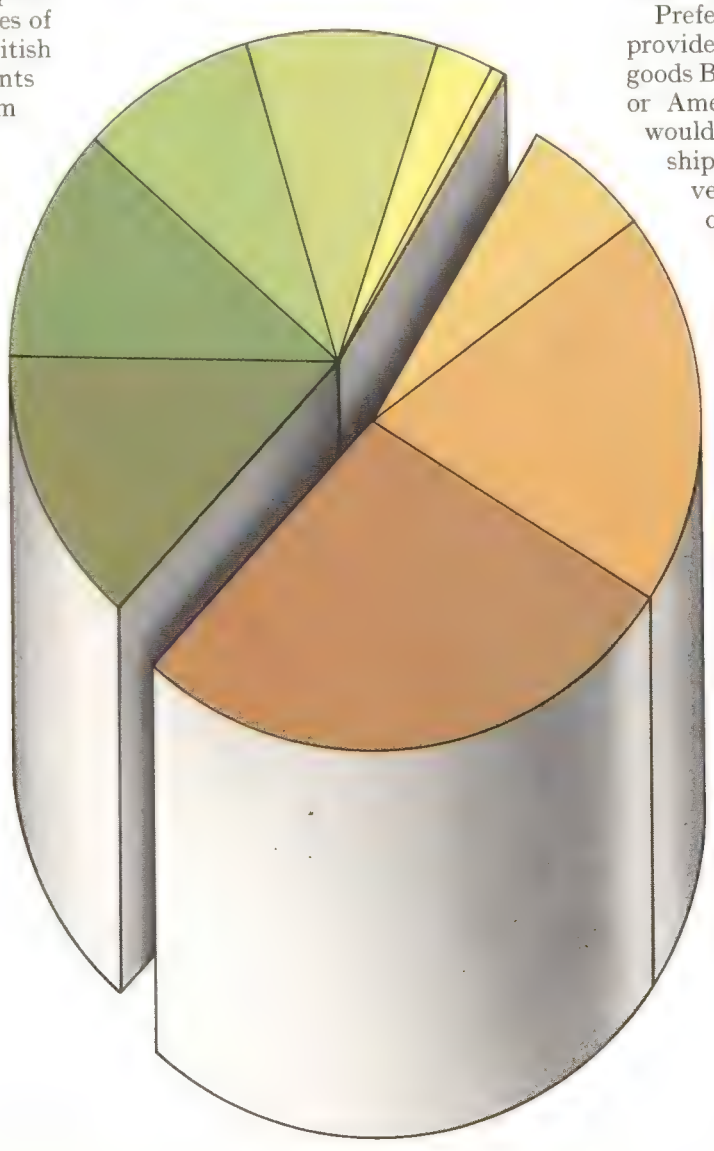
Britain buttressed her economic position in the non-self-governing colonies of Africa and Asia by the use of British political power. Colonial governments naturally ordered their supplies from Britain and British firms had substantial, though informal, advantages over foreign rivals. In the special case of India, which was the only non-self-governing British possession which might at this stage have developed into an industrial nation, the British refused to allow Indian industry to be protected by tariffs against British imports until the 1920s. In these and other ways Britain preserved a predominant, though declining, economic position in her Empire.

The third and last phase – usually known as "neo-mercantilism" – began in 1932 when Britain formally abandoned free trade at home and organized a new system of economic controls throughout her Empire and Commonwealth. This new form of imperial economy, which survived to the period of final decolonization in the 1960s, had been predictable since the 1890s when the British recognized that they had lost their international economic pre-eminence. When Joseph Chamberlain campaigned for a revival of imperial preference he was defeated by the deep-rooted attachment to free trade. Only mass unemployment following the world slump of 1930–2 persuaded the electorate to change its view: from then on Britain looked to the Empire for her economic salvation.

Preferential tariffs would, it was hoped, provide a market for the manufactured goods Britain was unable to sell in Europe or America. Trade within the Empire would fill the holds of laid-up British ships, while government loans to developing colonies would lead to orders for British industry, thereby reducing unemployment. In return, Britain would provide a

U.K. Overseas Investments 1914

A look at British foreign investments just prior to the First World War shows clearly that most Britons preferred to invest in independent countries – and especially in North America which received 34 per cent of the total overseas investments – rather than in Empire. Capital, sunk into private ventures and public authorities, was less at risk in established economies (as investment in Britain – four times total overseas investment – showed).



Investment within the Empire

Canada and Newfoundland	514·9
Australia and New Zealand	416·4
South Africa	370·2
India and Ceylon	378·8
West, East and Central Africa	82·2
Other Colonies	17·5
Total	1780·0

Investment outside the Empire

Europe	218·6
South America	756·6
Other	1983·3
Total	3763·3

The totals on the diagram are aggregate and represent investments from 1865 to 1914. They do not include the amounts invested by Britain in shipping industries.

preferential market for colonial raw materials which no one else seemed willing to buy.

All this meant a complex and rigid system of controls, which was tightened still further during the Second World War. Colonies could not use foreign currencies to buy overseas without British permission; colonial raw materials were bought in bulk by the British government at fixed prices; imports to the colonies were rationed. While they lasted, these controls brought the idea of an exclusive imperial economy closer to realization than at any other time in British history.

It is one thing to describe the imperial economy in its varying forms: it is another to decide who gained most advantage from it. Because the character of the imperial economy differed greatly in each of the three periods under review, it is necessary to consider each separately and in greater detail before coming to any final conclusion.

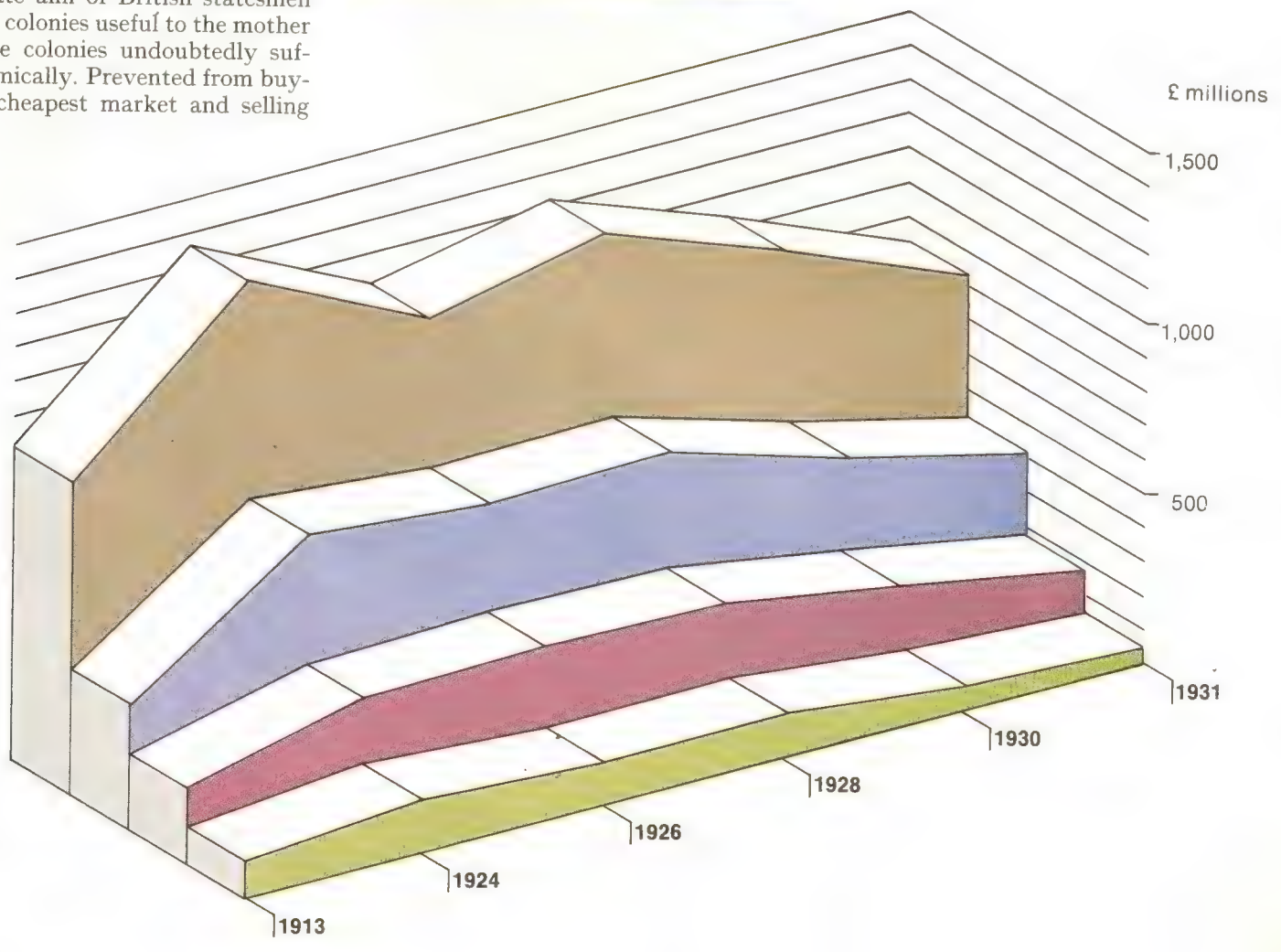
During the first two and a half centuries of the British Empire, when it was the deliberate aim of British statesmen to make the colonies useful to the mother country, the colonies undoubtedly suffered economically. Prevented from buying in the cheapest market and selling in the dearest, they provided the British middlemen with assured profits. It is widely assumed now that the alternative to this system was political independence and the right to trade freely. But such an alternative was by no means certain at the time.

Although the Americans did finally succeed in throwing off their British masters and avoiding domination by new ones, no one could be sure of the outcome beforehand. As late as 1776, some Americans were still apprehensive about the future and 50 years earlier the probable alternative to British rule would have been not independence but French rule – and the imposition of even stiffer economic restrictions on the colonists. In an age, therefore, when the whole of America was under European domination, the realistic comparison is not between mercantilism and free trade, but between the economic systems of rival European empires.

But what was the actual profit and loss to both Britain and her colonies during

Total Volume U.K. Trade 1913-1931

In the mid-1920s British trade was plagued by industrial unrest and a series of prolonged strikes – particularly by the coal-miners. The return of sterling to the pre-war gold standard also accounted for the decreased trading during those years.



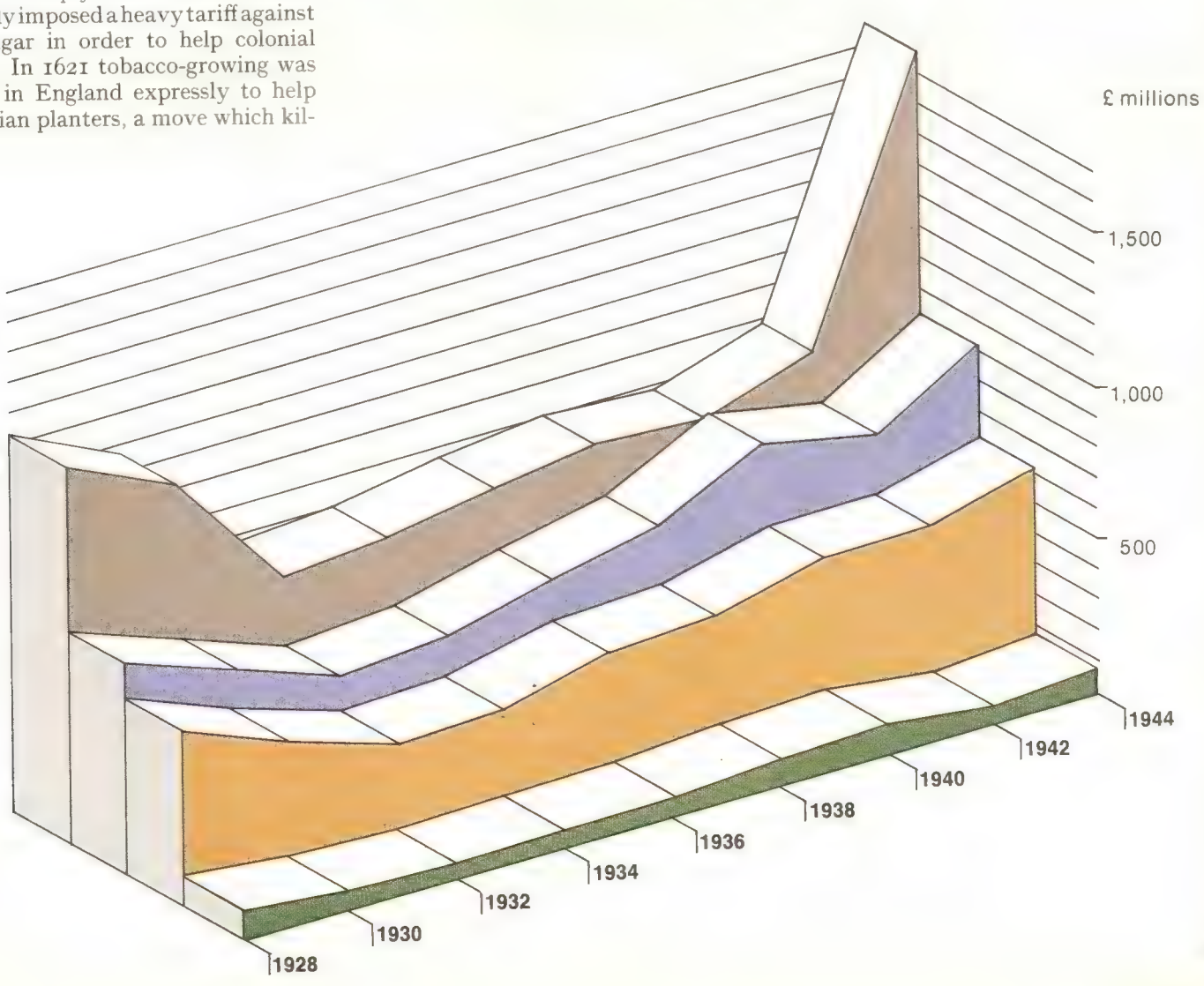
this period? Such calculations are extremely difficult to make, though one American historian has estimated that in 1773, on the eve of the American Revolution, the Americans probably lost between £590,000 and £1,500,000 – or between 20p and 60p per colonist – as a result of imperial trade restrictions. In return for her colonial "tribute," however, Britain provided and paid for the external defence of the colonies and bore much of their administrative costs. The estimated cost, for example, of maintaining the British Army in America in the 1760s was £350,000 a year, and to this had to be added the much greater cost of maintaining a Navy big enough to defend the colonies as well as Britain.

Britain was also forced to shoulder other costs that cannot be measured so precisely. She bound herself as far as possible to "buy Empire," though in every case this either cost her more than buying on the international market or harmed her own industries. Three examples out of many will make the point. Britain could have bought her sugar more cheaply from France, but she deliberately imposed a heavy tariff against French sugar in order to help colonial producers. In 1621 tobacco-growing was forbidden in England expressly to help the Virginian planters, a move which killed a flourishing home industry. Finally, Britain allowed American-built ships to be registered as "British" – and so comply with the Navigation Laws – to help the New England shipbuilders. Since these used cheaper timber than was available in Britain, the concession seriously damaged the British industry. The loss of America was, therefore, an immense boon to British shipyards.

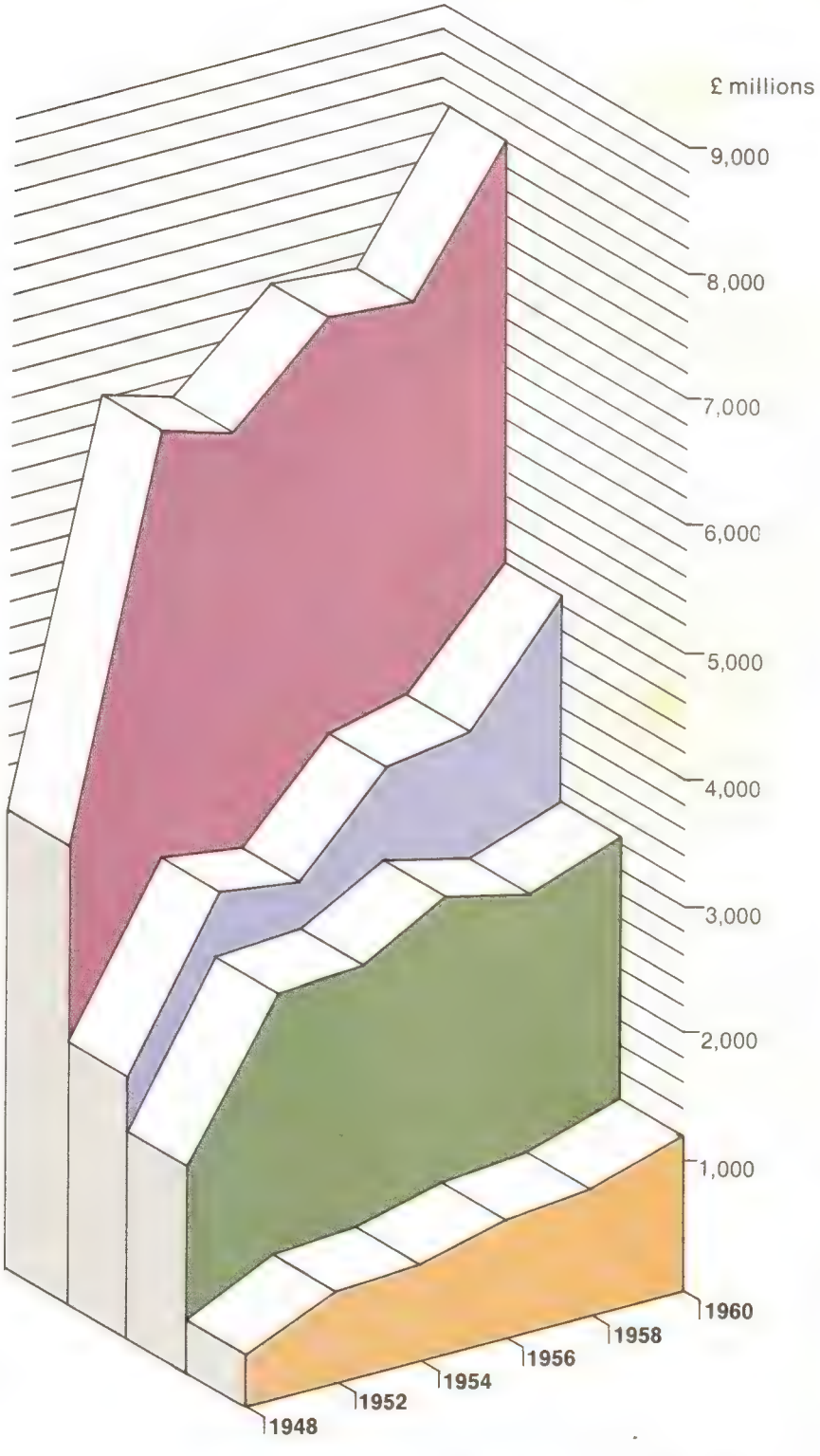
A careful examination of the imperial balance-sheet clearly shows that most, if not all, the profits Britain gained from mercantilism were offset by its costs. Shrewd observers such as Adam Smith concluded that the whole system was a fraud, providing only a small minority with a profit. The man in the street suffered from higher taxes and higher prices. If this was true of the 18th Century, it seemed even more obvious during the first half of the 19th Century. Once the American colonies had achieved their independence, the new colonies such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, cost much more than they

Total Volume U.K. Trade 1928-1944

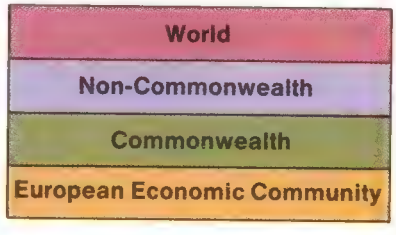
Though trade with her Empire and with foreign countries was up in 1928, Britain's trading figures dropped to their lowest ebb during the Great Depression. The slump which lasted from 1930 to 1932 put millions of people out of work.



Total Volume U.K. Trade 1948-1960



In earlier centuries Britain's trade with her colonies had never been as important as it became through her neo-mercantile period which lasted from about 1932 until decolonization in the 1960s. Britain clung to her "soft" and ready-made markets, taking advantage of the system of economic controls – whether blatant or implicit – she imposed on the Empire. But even though her trade with the colonies never reached 50 per cent of her total trade with the world, her reliance upon easy colonial markets made her industries complacent and slow to react when forced into the highly competitive markets of the European Economic Community.



were worth to defend and administer.

Their exports had preferential entry to Britain so that the price paid for sugar, wool and timber was higher than it would otherwise have been and the cost of colonial defence was greater than ever. But the colonies were mostly too poor and too thinly populated to provide much of a market for British exports. The boot was now on the other foot. Increasingly it was the British who wanted freedom of trade and the colonies, especially the sugar-producing West Indies, that wanted to retain the old imperial trading system for their own advantage.

It is far harder to assess the imperial balance-sheet during the era of free trade. Britain's two main needs were for raw materials at low prices and markets for her manufactured goods. Critics of the imperial system allege that she secured both through exploitation: that she allowed expatriate firms, which contributed little to the welfare or development of the dependencies, to make large profits from their natural resources; and that Britain secured markets by banning protective tariffs in the dependencies and discouraging their industrialization. This meant that India, for example, was able neither to protect her traditional textile industry against cheaper mass-produced English cottons nor to build up a mechanized textile industry capable of competing with the more advanced producers of the world.

Some parts of the charge must be admitted. Concessions to exploit natural resources were given fairly lightly, especially in the early days of colonization when colonial governments were anxious to attract overseas capital and enterprise. On the whole, colonial governments taxed expatriate companies very lightly, royalties were relatively small, and it was extremely rare for a colonial government to take shares in this type of enterprise. It is not true, however, that these enterprises contributed next to nothing to the countries in which they operated. All used local labour and if wages were lower than those paid to Europeans, they were larger than rates paid in other parts of the local economy.

By modern standards, too small a share of the profits was devoted to the colonies in which such enterprises operated. But these are the wrong standards to apply. The underdeveloped countries, whether independent or not, could utilize their natural resources only by relying on the capital, skill and markets of the technically advanced European nations. The correct comparison, therefore, is with independent states of similar economic development during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. By this comparison, British colonies were neither more nor less exploited than many sovereign states, including China, Siam, Persia, Turkey and most of Latin America. The European nations made the best bargain they could, and though this may sometimes have been harsh, the governments of independent Africa and Asia have more than righted the balance.

The second part of the charge is that free trade retarded colonial industrialization. This was certainly true in India, but the belief that free trade actually encouraged economic development by removing artificial restrictions was deeply and genuinely held in Britain. Nor can it be denied that the colonies did enjoy considerable economic advantages during the free trade era. The ending of internal obstacles to trade and production, the introduction of a Westernized monetary and credit system, the immense stimulus of the British market to primary producers, all combined to raise living standards in many tropical colonies.

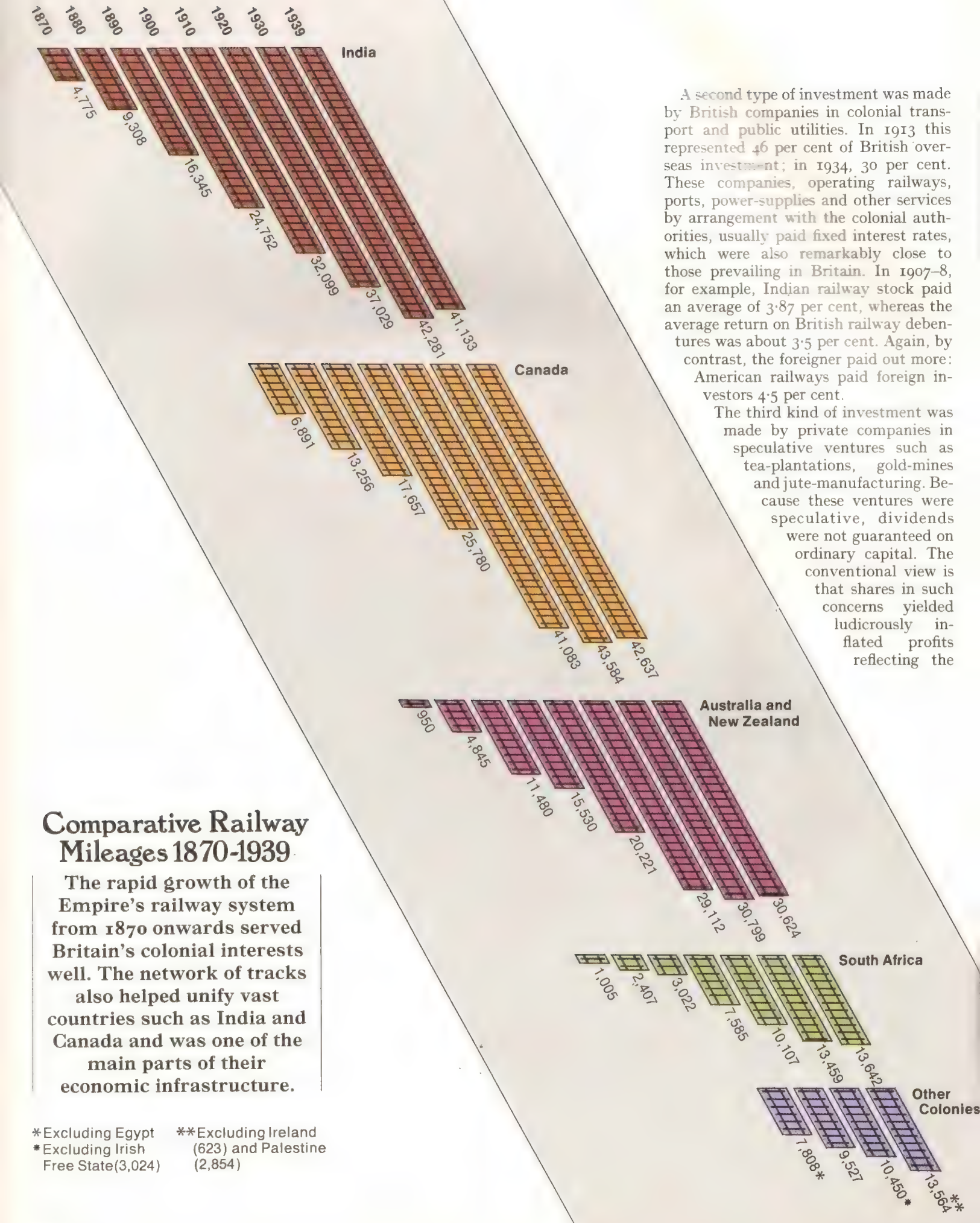
A subsidiary charge is that a free international economy meant a drain of financial resources from the colonies to Britain. These resources included the profits and capital appreciation of large expatriate firms; interest on loans; the savings of colonial officials, merchants and others; and payments made for services rendered by the imperial government. It is alleged that the effect of all this was to overburden the colonies with payments, thus depriving them of foreign exchange which they could have devoted to their own economic development.

Certainly, most developing countries nowadays have to balance their need to protect their foreign currency reserves against their need to attract foreign capital and enterprise by allowing the remission of a reasonable amount of earnings. But complete freedom of currency movement was an essential feature of an international free trade economy. That system ended in 1939, and even before the break-up of colonial rule 20 years later, Britain had, as we have seen, introduced tight currency restrictions.

In the end, therefore, whether one regards transfer of resources as desirable depends on whether one considers foreign enterprise to be useful in a developing economy. If so, then a reasonable freedom must be permitted; and at most it may be thought that the total freedom which existed in the British system before 1939 would be inapplicable under modern conditions.

A most difficult and interesting question concerns the profits on British capital investment in the colonies. The Marxist view is that the advanced countries of the West made greater profits by investing in the underdeveloped tropical territories than they would have made by investing at home. The attractions of colonial investment were an unlimited labour supply, low wages and enormous natural resources that could be exploited very cheaply. Thus, although capital investment is usually regarded as a positive contribution to colonial development, it can be looked on as a form of capitalist plunder. Which view is correct? Did British capital earn so much more in the colonies than it could have earned at home?

To answer these questions it is necessary to distinguish between three different types of investment. First, there were loans raised by the colonial governments in the London Stock Market. In 1913 these amounted to 30 per cent, in 1934 to 44 per cent, of all known British investment overseas. There is no evidence that these government bonds were a device for exploiting the colonial taxpayer. Because the credit of the colonial governments was good, rates of interest were usually no more than 0·5 per cent above the going rates for loans raised by the British government itself. By contrast, foreign governments were normally required to pay an extra 1 per cent on their loans, which reflected the Stock Market's lack of trust in their political stability. Colonial status therefore enhanced public creditworthiness.



Comparative Railway Mileages 1870-1939

The rapid growth of the Empire's railway system from 1870 onwards served Britain's colonial interests well. The network of tracks also helped unify vast countries such as India and Canada and was one of the main parts of their economic infrastructure.

A second type of investment was made by British companies in colonial transport and public utilities. In 1913 this represented 46 per cent of British overseas investment; in 1934, 30 per cent. These companies, operating railways, ports, power-supplies and other services by arrangement with the colonial authorities, usually paid fixed interest rates, which were also remarkably close to those prevailing in Britain. In 1907–8, for example, Indian railway stock paid an average of 3·87 per cent, whereas the average return on British railway debentures was about 3·5 per cent. Again, by contrast, the foreigner paid out more: American railways paid foreign investors 4·5 per cent.

The third kind of investment was made by private companies in speculative ventures such as tea-plantations, gold-mines and jute-manufacturing. Because these ventures were speculative, dividends were not guaranteed on ordinary capital. The conventional view is that shares in such concerns yielded ludicrously inflated profits reflecting the

*Excluding Egypt
*Excluding Irish Free State(3,024)

**Excluding Ireland (623) and Palestine (2,854)

favourable conditions provided by colonial rule. Such a view, however, is extremely short-sighted. Speculative companies are much the same wherever they operate: the Stock Market price of shares reflects the market's estimation of an enterprise's profitability. The more uncertain the project, the lower the market price must be to attract investors. If the venture comes off, the speculator may make a fortune. But if it does not, he is just as likely to lose his whole investment.

Speculative colonial ventures of the 19th and early 20th Centuries involved a particularly high degree of risk. Immense problems of climate, transport, labour-supply and technology had first to be overcome. Huge variations in world market prices for raw materials had then to be faced. The British were prepared to back such ventures, particularly before the 1920s, because there were relatively few openings for investment in the ordinary share capital of the more profitable manufacturing concerns at home. Only in the early 20th Century did most of the big British companies turn themselves from family partnerships into limited liability companies, going to the market for money to finance expansion.

The investor in a new colonial enterprise might be a patriot or a humanitarian: he might take shares in the British South Africa Company to support Rhodes's plans for British control of Central Africa, or in the Imperial British Africa Company to support Christian missions in Uganda. Or he might be a gambler who hoped a small investment would make him a fortune. Some firms did, indeed, make high profits under very favourable conditions.

The British Malacca Rubber Plantations Limited, for example, paid dividends ranging from 10 per cent to 75 per cent in the period 1912–19, when world demand for rubber was strong. Similarly, British companies owning jute-mills in East Bengal made fabulous profits during the First World War, when their product was in great demand for use in the trenches of Flanders. But these were exceptional instances. In general, there seems no economic reason why a private venture in a tropical colony would necessarily make higher profits than a comparable enterprise is a more advanced economy.

The issue can be seen in proper perspective when it is realized that the average return on investment in South African gold-mines during the period 1919–63 was 9 per cent, whereas on a similar investment in United Kingdom Equity Stock, the return would have been 7·6 per cent. The difference of 1·4 per cent was a reasonable Stock Market allowance for the relative uncertainty of the gold-mining industry.

One other question needs to be considered. How important to the British economy and to British prosperity was this flow of capital to the colonies, regardless of the rate of return? For an answer we have to make two comparisons: first, between total British investment at home and total investment overseas; second, between total investment overseas and that in Britain's tropical dependencies.

Though estimates differ widely, one calculation shows that total British investment at home rose from about £5,000,000,000 in 1875 to £12,355,000,000 by 1914 – about £184,000,000 a year. Total British investment overseas, meanwhile, rose from an estimated total of £785,000,000 in 1871 to £3,500,000,000 in 1911 – about £68,000,000 a year. The significance of these figures is that while total new investment at home greatly exceeded that abroad, the British economy was becoming increasingly geared to overseas investment. Between 1907 and 1914, new capital export equalled or even exceeded new investment at home. At the time many men, including J. A. Hobson, the Liberal critic of imperialism, deprecated this trend, claiming that it deprived the British worker of jobs and higher wages.

It is not possible to examine that claim here. The question we have to discuss is whether or not all the capital leaving Britain was being invested in the new tropical colonies. Of the £3,763,000,000 invested overseas in 1914, less than half remained inside the British Empire. The colonies, therefore, appear to have been a very important area for investment. But by deducting investments in the self-governing Dominions – Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa – we are left with only £478,500,000 for the whole dependent Empire. Of this, India and Ceylon accounted for £378,800,000, leaving about £100,000,000 among the other colonies – under 3 per cent of total British overseas investment.

These figures show that the economic importance of Britain's dependencies to the British economy should not be overstated. It might have been expected that imperial rule would provide conditions particularly favourable to British capitalists. It is clear from the figures, however, that they preferred to invest their money in the developed economies of Europe, North America and the British Dominions, where there was neither cheap labour nor tropical raw materials, but where there were good markets and adequate roads, railways and power-supplies instead.

Britain, then, did not need these new tropical dependencies as much as they needed British capital. Their problem was not that they were exploited by British investors, but that they were unable to persuade enough British (or foreign) capitalists to invest in their primitive economies. In 1962, after 50 years of effort to attract capital to these underdeveloped economies, total British investment in all the non-white Commonwealth was still only £1,314,600,000 out of a total overseas investment of £4,496,900,000. It is obvious that if imperial investment in the colonies amounted to exploitation, the trouble with Britain's tropical colonies is that they have not been "exploited" enough for their own good.

The balance-sheet during the free trade period shows profits and losses on both sides. Britain certainly benefited from the trading and investment opportunities provided by her colonial Empire. But against these benefits must be set the enormous cost of running the Empire: the upkeep of armies, navies and imperial administration. It is equally certain that the colonies benefited in many ways, though they would undoubtedly have been even better off if all the profits made by British expatriates had stayed there and all the services provided by Britain had been free.

The final phase of Empire, stretching

from 1932 to 1970, was neo-mercantile, and was distinguished from the preceding free trade period by a revival of imperial preference and by far greater British stimulation of colonial economic development. The significant feature of these years was Britain's partly successful attempt to build a self-sufficient imperial economic system similar to that of the 18th Century.

With the onset of the Great Depression in the early 1930s, followed by the Second World War, it seemed that international trade was dying. Industrial countries like Britain could not sell their manufactures to other industrialized states, while primary-producing countries (which included most of Britain's colonies) could sell their produce only at very low prices – if at all. The imperial solution was to make the Empire an enormous mutual aid society in which Britain and the colonies would buy each other's goods in preference to those of third countries.

At the same time, Britain made unprecedented efforts to speed up economic development in the colonies, partly at least because the richer they became the more she could sell to them. The Second World War and the world shortages of the immediate post-war period made this kind of mutual aid even more essential. Only from the mid-1950s did increasing international prosperity make it practicable for Britain to begin dismantling the machinery of imperial self-help.

While it lasted, the system meant a series of stringent controls involving gains and losses on both sides. For Britain it provided markets for her ailing industries. In 1920 the Empire took 34·3 per cent of British exports; in 1937, 48·4 per cent; in 1947, 52·7 per cent. The decline began in the mid-1950s, and by 1966 the Empire and Commonwealth once again took only 33·3 per cent.

Conversely, the system provided essential markets for colonial exporters during the Depression years. In 1920 Empire goods represented 25·3 per cent of total British imports; in 1937, 39·4 per cent; in 1956, 47·1 per cent. But in 1966 the Empire share of British imports had declined to 33·3 per cent. The advantage to Britain was that she secured vital raw materials for her war effort and, after 1945, she was able to re-export them for badly needed foreign exchange. Such was the major reward of Empire during a critical period of British history.

Control of currency also paid dividends to Britain in the years after 1939. The creation of the sterling area, for which she was banker, meant that Britain could ration the use of scarce foreign currencies in the colonies and also (with their consent) the Dominions, excluding Canada. Such control meant that dollars earned by colonial exports were pooled, thus greatly strengthening the pound sterling in the international currency exchanges. It also meant that the colonies, often against their own interests, were prevented from buying goods outside the sterling area. In addition, Britain rationed imports to the colonies, especially of manufactured goods in short supply. As a result, for some years after the war the colonies had to build up credit balances in London and were often liable to domestic inflation due to shortages of goods in the shops.

What did the colonies get from Britain in return? During the war, very little except promises, for Britain had nothing else to offer. Nevertheless, her basic intention from the early 1930s was to inject massive amounts of capital into the colonies to finance their economic development. This was the special and unprecedented feature of modern British imperialism. Whereas before, the colonies had to pay for their own development by raising loans in the London money-market or by relying on private investors, it was now decided that economic development should be undertaken by the British government through grants or loans on easy terms.

There is a striking contrast between the amount of loans and grants given during this and earlier periods. Between 1918 and 1939 Britain's contribution of public funds to the Empire (excluding the self-governing Dominions) averaged only some £2,000,000 a year. Between 1929 and 1945, however, when the Colonial Development loan and grant system was operating, British colonial Africa alone received £9,000,000, of which £5,800,000 was in outright grants.

After the war the process accelerated. In the ten years from 1945 to 1955, the colonies received £43,000,000 in grants, plus perhaps a further £50,000,000 in British government loans. Between 1955 and 1964 grants rose to £243,000,000 and loans to £168,000,000. Thus in the period 1946–64, Britain devoted at least £506,000,000 of public funds to the development of colonial Africa. In addition, there was a very substantial flow of private investment, which by 1962 amounted to at least £370,000,000, excluding that in South Africa.

Where then did the balance of economic advantage lie? Did Britain exploit her colonies or were they, in Disraeli's famous phrase, "millstones" round the mother-country's neck? Analysis has shown that a clear-cut answer is impossible. At all times there were some aspects of the prevailing imperial economic system that were prejudicial to the colonies: Britain's trading monopoly during the mercantilist period; enforced free trade in India in the 19th Century; rigorous currency and other controls after 1939. There were also individual Britons who exploited colonial land, labour and mineral resources, caring little for the interests of the native population. Nor, until later years, did Britain devote sufficient of her own resources to improving the health, wealth and education of the majority of her subject peoples.

But it can be said that the imperial system was an energizing force mobilizing colonial resources locked-up by age-old ignorance, poverty and isolation. As an advanced industrial power, Britain was able to do things for her colonies which they were unable to do for themselves. It is conceivable that some might sooner or later have managed to restructure their own economic and social systems without serving a colonial apprenticeship. But of most it can fairly be said that British rule set them on a path of development which they showed little capacity or desire to undertake on their own initiative. Certainly, every British possession was richer and better equipped to improve its standard of living when the British left than when they arrived.

THE NAKED EMPEROR

Stripped of her colonial possessions, Britain has come to terms with her new role in the world.

Now that the Empire has come to an end and Britain has once again become an integral part of Europe, as she was until the 16th Century, what has been the effect of the imperial experience on Britain's dependencies and on Britain herself? The fond British belief that the Empire shaped nations out of tribes and transformed primitive subsistence economies into modern economic systems, is hotly denied by many of the former colonies. In their eyes British imperialism was no more than a temporary and unwelcome intrusion. Appealing to myth, legend, and occasionally historical fact, they claim that alien rule was not necessary to the evolution of civilization, wealth or good government, and that their indigenous cultures triumphantly survived the depredations of missionaries, soldiers, administrators and teachers. Was British rule one of the most dynamic forces in world history? Or was it simply an unimportant tremor momentarily affecting Britain and her colonies, but having no lasting consequence on either?

It is still too soon to answer these questions with any assurance. Perhaps only the historian writing a century from now will know whether Britain's occupation of parts of tropical Africa was the prelude to the emergence of Westernized African states, or the prologue to a reversion, by choice or default, to the traditional patterns of African society.

Instead of making predictions, it is more useful to survey the contemporary consequences and achievements of Empire. In the case of the white settlement colonies, the imprint of British rule has been deep and ineradicable. The United States remains, some two centuries after its Declaration of Independence, fundamentally British in language, law and constitutional forms. This is so despite the fact that most modern generations of Americans stem from countries other than Britain. This is all the more so with Canada, Australia and New Zealand, which were all established long after American independence. Even South Africa, with its Afrikaans-speaking majority, was profoundly influenced by 150 years of British rule.

It is less easy to measure Britain's impact on the tropical dependencies – India, Africa, South-East Asia, the Pacific. Although there were substantial white settlements in Central and East Africa, and smaller groups elsewhere, Britain's role in these colonies was not settlement, but government, defence, trade and investment. In 1833 Lord Macaulay wanted the British impact on India to be so total that eventually there would emerge "a class of persons Indian in colour and blood, but English in tastes, opinions, in morals and in intellect." Most Britons, either openly or secretly, hoped that Britain's impact would also have a similar effect on the other colonial peoples.

It was, though, too great a hope. It assumed that British culture was so superior to all others that subject peoples would want to adopt it as soon as they came to appreciate it. A minority in all dependencies did come to respect and adopt elements of the British way of life, though few ever became totally Anglicized. The great mass of the population in India and elsewhere, however, remained largely unaffected.

Two major obstacles prevented these dependent societies from being transformed into replicas of Britain: the strength of their own cultural and religious traditions and the time and effort needed to permeate British influence over vast areas and among huge populations. Of the two, religion was the strongest obstacle to assimilation. Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, with their complex cultural and social influences, all proved virtually impregnable to British and Christian infiltration.

Hinduism, though shaken early in the 19th Century by the partial break-up of the old Hindu society, survived to become an integral part of 20th-Century Indian nationalism. It was rare for any Hindus – except those of the lowest, untouchable caste – to be converted. Buddhism and Islam were never severely shaken: in Ceylon and South-East Asia few Buddhists ever left their faith, while Muslims proved just as resistant. And because these faiths survived, the British accepted and lived with much of the private law and social conventions integral to them. Though they destroyed *suttee* in India, they accepted polygamy in Muslim societies under their rule; and the civil law of British India was based on Hindu and Muslim custom and principles rather than on English Common Law.

In Africa and the Pacific the majority of the subject peoples were "pagan" and they offered a happy hunting ground for missionaries who could end cannibalism

and infanticide by converting entire societies. In these areas British culture had its greatest impact: whereas most men succeeding to power in India and Pakistan were Hindu or Muslim, almost all the new rulers of black Africa and the South Pacific were Christian. But with this greater impact came the destruction, too, of a much larger element of the indigenous African and South Pacific culture than was destroyed in India or South-East Asia.

British parliamentary practice, in contrast to the limited success of the "civilizing mission," had a deep and lasting effect on India, Pakistan and Ceylon, where representative government was well understood for at least two generations before independence. In most of the other dependencies, however, the introduction of a parliamentary system came too late for any real influences to take root. As a result, most of the paper constitutions thrashed out at the traditional independence negotiations in London in the 1950s and 1960s were torn up soon after the granting of independence.

But if parliamentary government, which depends on fairly sophisticated electorates and respected conventions of political behaviour, proved difficult to export, British or more generally European methods of government were not. Centralization of power and a professional civil service replaced widely differing systems, from the large-scale and quite sophisticated government of Mughal India, to the simple, non-literate, custom-bound governments of African tribes. These systems all had common features: they were relatively decentralized, which meant large empires were rare and seldom effectively controlled; governments were not checked by written law and most rulers had autocratic powers. Above all, they lacked professional administrators bound by incorruptible service to the state rather than personal obedience to the ruler.

The British themselves did not have all these tools of government until early in the 19th Century. The principle of the rule of written, statute law made by a sovereign legislature was established in the 17th Century, but effective centralization of power and a professional civil service were creations of the early 19th Century. Indeed, the Indian Civil Service, established in its modern form by Lord Cornwallis in the 1790s, was the first organization of its kind in the Empire.

As important as an incorruptible civil service was the establishment of a strong and centralized government to administer the vast colonies – especially those like India where Britain created much larger units by amalgamating many smaller kingdoms and chiefdoms. Once welded together these places throughout the Empire were more strongly governed than ever before and governed from a single capital: Calcutta (later shifted to New Delhi), Colombo, Kuala Lumpur, Accra, Nairobi. Regardless of the area's size the power of the central government passed down through the hierarchy of professional administrators to the District Officer, the local police officer, magistrate and junior Army officer. Each one had the full power of the state behind him and it was this power – central and local alike – that the nationalist leaders of the 20th Century sought to control. It was this same centralized administrative structure and tradition of obedience that they inherited and exploited to the full after independence.

In their attempts to create their own "nationality," many newly independent states tried to throw off the cultural influences of Britain. Parliamentary government, freedom of the Press, freedom of speech, the security of the individual and his property under known laws and the independence of judges to defend his rights were discarded in whole or part as inconvenient and alien. The civil service fell victim to corruption in many places. Yet, it became a primary aim to preserve the unity of the ex-colony in the form bequeathed by Britain against the disintegrating forces of tribalism and at the same time to use and extend the authority of the central government.

In the end, therefore, the British impact on the dependencies left many contrasting relics. In the white settlement colonies it left democratic societies closely akin to Britain in methods of government, education, economic life and culture. In Malaya, India and Ceylon – the most sophisticated of the tropical possessions – the inheritance was mixed: democracy, rule of law, high-class professional administration, an essentially European economic system, British forms of education and Socialism, but limited cultural assimilation.

In tropical Africa the inheritance was less varied: little, if any, respect for the rule of law; a dwindling concern for constitutional forms; partially Westernized economies; and a high degree of cultural assimilation among a small educated élite, but little effect on the masses.

In every British colony, though, English was the lingua franca. Even the great Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, wrote in English because, as he himself said, he would thereby have many more readers, even in India, than if he wrote in his own Bengali dialect. Given such contrasts, only one general conclusion can be drawn: the colonial experience left a very deep stamp which, whatever the new states may wish to think, redirected the course of their history as surely as the Roman and Norman conquests redirected that of England.

Finally, what effect did the Empire have on Britain herself? The answer will be clearer if four different aspects are dealt with in turn: the economic consequences; the effects of emigration; the cultural impact; and the relevance of Empire to Britain's world status.

Although the Empire provided her with significant trading advantages, it was probably never critical to Britain's economic survival. In the 17th and 18th Centuries the monopoly of the carrying trade certainly helped the expansion of the English mercantile marine; the monopoly of certain colonial exports also stimulated Britain's trade with Europe, while the profits derived from these activities probably provided funds which helped to modernize British agriculture and industry. Thus, so long as Britain had few technological advantages over European competitors, and while other European powers possessed their own colonial empires from which Britain was excluded, the colonial monopoly almost certainly helped economic growth.

It is less certain that this was so in the 19th Century. Once Britain had acquired

a substantial lead in industry, shipping, banking, insurance and other aspects of a modern economic system, and once the colonial empires of other powers in America had become independent and therefore open to British enterprise, her colonies ceased to provide her with any essential economic advantages. The new settlement colonies and India undoubtedly served as useful markets and an increasingly important source of raw materials; but so, too, did comparable independent states such as the U.S.A. and Latin America. As we have seen, Britain's main economic reason for annexing tropical colonies in the late 19th Century was not because she needed new territories, but because she wished to prevent other European powers from acquiring them and closing their markets with tariffs. Unrestricted access to these markets perhaps made it possible for Britain to preserve her own free trade system longer than might otherwise have been practicable.

After 1918, and particularly after 1932, when Britain lost her economic primacy and felt the full force of competition from other developed states, there is no doubt that imperial preference, coupled with free access to colonial markets and the income from overseas investments, helped to balance the British trading account. It is possible that unemployment might have been still higher without these imperial markets, and the weakness of the pound sterling after 1945 suggests that, as an international currency it depended heavily on hard currency earnings yielded within the imperial sterling bloc.

But all this had an adverse effect on the British economy. By encouraging the British to rely on "soft" imperial markets for exports which they could not sell under normal competitive conditions elsewhere, the imperial system almost certainly held back the modernization of the British economy. It feather-bedded sections of British industry which would otherwise have been forced to modernize or die, thereby reducing Britain's competitive position outside the cosy confines of the imperial system.

The end of Empire and the run-down of imperial preference in the 1960s and 1970s forced Britain to face up to economic realities she had long been trying to avoid. Instead of being the industrialized leader of an imperial economic system, she found herself a small and relatively backward industrial state having to compete with more vigorous rivals in Europe and America Desperately trying to overcome the consequences of her recent imperial past, Britain has reached a new turning-point in her history. In 1558, with Calais and a continental destiny lost, she began to look westward to Ireland and America. In the 1850s, with the tide of free trade flowing in her favour, she virtually seceded from her Empire for half a century. In the 1970s she has entered the E.E.C. hoping to find an alternative economic setting in which competition from other advanced industrial countries might provide the stimulus to make her once again, as she was in the 19th Century, a dynamic industrial leader.

About the significance of Empire to Britain as a source of homes and jobs there can be little argument. For three centuries the settlement colonies and dependencies provided the expanding populations of Britain and Ireland living space and work under the British flag. Different types of colony offered different opportunities. The white settlement colonies provided a safety-valve for the artisan, the small farmer, the industrial worker, the domestic servant, the pauper and the convict. The tropical colonies, by contrast, provided careers for the middle class as administrators, doctors, engineers, soldiers and missionaries.

The effects on Britain were twofold. First, the colonies – together with the United States after 1783 – largely solved the problem of population growth. It was only in the 20th Century, when these territories began to reach what they regarded as saturation point, that Britain had seriously to consider the problem of over-population. This was made worse by the unprecedented influx of coloured Commonwealth citizens to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s.

Second, it seems likely that the availability of professional work within the Empire enabled the British middle class to maintain their inbred distaste for commercial activity. Britain alone could not have provided sufficient professional openings for the children of large middle-class families. But with the end of Empire and the disappearance of job opportunities – except for the technically qualified – these middle-class professionals had to redirect their ambitions. Either they had to enter industry or trade or become manual workers. It could, therefore, be argued that by forcing men of middle-class origin to come to terms with the realities of a competitive industrial society, the end of Empire weakened class barriers and increased social mobility in Britain.

The cultural impact of Empire on Britain is more difficult to define, though it was certainly less significant than the impact Britain made on the colonies. The English language absorbed a multitude of words brought back from India and Africa, and architecture and the visual arts were deeply affected by the shapes, textures and colours which the British found overseas. Intellectual trends were also influenced by contact with other literary, religious and cultural traditions. In the political and pyschological sense, the whole British view of themselves as a superior people was conditioned by their awareness of their imperial role.

Finally, what effect did the Empire have on Britain as a world power – apart, that is, from any effect it may have had in making her wealthy enough to sustain that role? Did the Empire make Britain more or less powerful than she would otherwise have been? The reason for believing that the Empire made her more powerful is that it provided at least two elements essential to a major power: bases and men. Each colony was a potential military base and in the early 20th Century there were very few parts of the world in which the British could not have mounted a major expedition from some nearby possession.

British naval superiority up to the First World War depended on an imperial network of ports, fuelling depots and repair facilities round the globe. Rapid and secure communication with the dependencies was made possible by an "all red" submarine telegraph, which touched land only where the Union flag flew. Even after 1945 the idea of Britain as a world power was closely connected

with the availability of air bases in British colonies or ex-colonies which made defence treaties with Britain.

As for manpower, Britain herself lacked the population from which large armies could be recruited. But in India – and later, though to a lesser extent, in tropical Africa – she was able to recruit big professional armies without difficulty. Though not up to European military standards, they served well enough for wars outside Europe. For 150 years Britain's strength and status in the vast region stretching from East Africa to the China Sea depended enormously on the availability of Indian troops. This reserve of manpower, deployed through Africa and Asia, made 19th-Century Britain a great military as well as the foremost naval power. In both world wars the British effort was immensely strengthened by colonial troops and by the armies of the self-governing Dominions.

But these strategic benefits were acquired at a price. To defend an Empire stretching over such tremendous distances meant a wide dispersion of British ships, men, and, eventually, aircraft. Since it was almost impossible to concentrate military resources in Europe in a crisis, British diplomacy was seriously weakened on many occasions in the 19th Century. Again, although colonies were potential vantage-points against foreign powers, they were also potential targets for those powers. British foreign policy during the 19th Century was bedevilled by the fear that Russia, France or some other power might attack British colonial possessions. As a result, British commitments in Africa, especially Egypt and nearby regions, were constant elements of weakness in British diplomacy.

In addition, the special conditions of small colonial wars probably had an adverse effect on the quality of the armed forces and on their ability to fight a major war in Europe. In the 18th Century this had worked the other way round. Redcoats trained in parade-ground tactics for European fighting had often cut sorry figures when facing American Indians or rebellious colonists battling on their own ground. But by the late 19th Century most British soldiers had experience of fighting unsophisticated and badly equipped non-European forces and almost none of fighting Europeans.

The Boer War taught a lesson, but in 1914 the British Army, though much improved, was still no match in size or equipment for continental armies. As late as the 1950s, Britain's contribution to the N.A.T.O. defence system was still handicapped by the dispersal of her forces throughout the world. Only with the final decision in the late 1960s to end defence commitments east of Suez was Britain able once again to concentrate her limited defence resources on Europe and the sea.

Britain, it is clear, would have been a very different kind of country without an empire, but its significance as a source of strength must not be exaggerated. It was not the Empire which made her rich and powerful but rather the wealth and power she generated through her own efforts that enabled her to acquire the Empire. It follows, therefore, that the end of Empire made less difference to Britain than many had predicted. Some ideas and attitudes naturally died hard. It was particularly difficult for Britain to free herself from the belief that she was still a first-rate world power and that in some undefined way the Commonwealth would enable her to maintain that role. But this was wishful thinking. By the 1960s Britain was no longer in the front rank of great powers and her new status as a second-ranker was undermined still further by the emergence of a welter of small, weak, and irresponsible often aggressive new states in the aftermath of Empire.

The Commonwealth, far from offsetting these problems, actually added to Britain's difficulties by preventing her from adjusting to her new role in Europe. Shocked at the wayward ingratitude of many of their ex-colonies, disappointed at their hasty departure from British standards of liberty, government and law, and resentful of being pilloried and abused by the strident nationalists of Africa and Asia, many in Britain soon came to regard the Commonwealth as an inconvenient and risky farce.

Common nationality and trade preferences have disappeared, sterling has ceased to be a uniform currency, and member-states have proved unwilling to subordinate national interest to the cause of common defence and foreign policies.

Despite these setbacks there are, however, still practical reasons for such an association to endure. It enriches some through aid or trade; it makes some feel more secure and others more important; it provides a valuable network of intelligence and consultation, particularly for member-countries which cannot afford to maintain diplomatic posts throughout the world. Above all, it would be wrong to undervalue its quiet, unsensational and practical routine work in seeking to create greater understanding between the haves and the have-nots of the world.

Three possibilities appear to face the Commonwealth: it may disintegrate into a rump of European settler states; it may succeed in creating an effective multi-racial partnership; or it may be superseded by some larger international grouping. Meanwhile, Britain has to face the fact that the Commonwealth, like the Emperor's legendary clothing, cannot hide her nakedness as a small island in the North Atlantic. Although there are still some who regret Britain's entry into Europe because it implies a final break with the imperial past, membership of the Common Market is proof that realism has prevailed.

Empire arose from a particular phase of Britain's relations with the world and reflected a unique but transient balance of wealth and power between herself and less-developed peoples. Seizing her opportunity, she did good to both herself and to those she ruled. Now that the British have withdrawn their remaining legions and hauled down the last of their flags, they are realizing that the root of their greatness has always lain in their own qualities as an island race. Provided the British do not allow themselves to relapse into morbid defeatism – as other post-imperial powers have done – there is no reason why the end of Empire should also be the end of wealth or contentment.

By A.J.P. Taylor

CONQUERORS AND PROFITEERS

This section provides an alternative and less favourable view of Empire.

History began and prehistory ended when men learned to read and write. Literate men produce a civilization, and almost every civilization has sought to extend its sway over others. Such is the essence of Empire and ancient history is a record of successive empires. Empires arose first in Egypt and Mesopotamia. The Old Testament tells the story of a people repeatedly conquered and yet surviving. The Medes, the Assyrians and the Persians all had their day.

Alexander the Great established a short-lived empire which encompassed the known world. The great Empire of Rome has left its marks on Europe to the present day. The Chinese Empire overshadowed the Far East for more than 2,000 years. When Europeans broke into the New World they encountered the Empires of the Incas and the Aztecs.

All empires were systems of domination, won by conquest and dependent upon superior strength. All, too, had a superior way of life, or so the imperial people believed. The imperial system of politics, laws and religion was supposed to be uniquely inspired, and every empire claimed that it was bestowing benefits on those whom it conquered, even when the benefit took the form of extermination. In reality, the imperial people took most of the benefits for themselves.

The empires of ancient times were land empires. Their power rested on armies, and they extended their sway by conquering adjacent territories. The legions, rather than political wisdom, held the Roman Empire together, and it fell when the legions lost their strength. Throughout the Middle Ages there was still a Roman Empire in eastern Europe and a shadowy attempt at one in the west. Even the English entered the imperial competition during the Hundred Years War of the 14th Century, when Edward III attempted to establish an empire in France. That was an antiquated enterprise. During the 15th Century the European peoples of the Atlantic seaboard developed a new form of power. They turned to the oceans. That was the beginning of modern imperialism.

The driving force behind maritime exploration was economic – with a dash of geographical curiosity thrown in. The merchants of western Europe wanted to break Venice's monopoly of the spice trade by opening a direct route to the Far East. They succeeded. The Portuguese circumnavigated Africa and crossed the Indian Ocean. As an almost accidental by-product they established an overseas empire – the only one the relics of which still survive. The Spaniards hoped to reach the same goal by crossing the Atlantic. Instead, they discovered America and set up there a vast empire, richly endowed with gold and silver.

Both Portuguese and Spaniards were also missionaries. In their empires they converted; they did not exterminate. Christianity, in its Roman Catholic form, as well as trade, followed their flag. Wherever they ruled, Christianity has predominated to the present day - in Goa as much as in South America.

The English were late in entering the competition for overseas empire. Though John Cabot discovered Newfoundland in 1497, nothing followed from this for almost 100 years. For much of the 16th Century England was hard pressed to assert her independence from continental powers. Protestantism was part of this assertion, giving the English a feeling of superiority over other races. From the moment that the English broke with Roman Catholicism in 1533, they regarded themselves as a Chosen People, authorized by God to override the ordinary laws of civilized behaviour. The sea-dogs of Elizabeth's time, so much admired by 19th-Century historians, were, in fact, pirates.

The aim of Drake, Hawkins and the rest was to seize for themselves the loot which the Portuguese and Spaniards were deriving from their empires. As this became more difficult, their successors turned more or less casually to establishing overseas settlements of their own. And since the richest prizes had gone to others – or so it seemed – the English had to make do with North America, where there was neither gold nor silver.

Religion reinforced greed. In the 17th Century, Puritans who could not worship according to their own fashion at home established New England. In their view the pursuit of wealth was a religious duty, and they did not neglect it. At the same time other Englishmen set up chartered companies to trade with Russia, the Levant and India. The last of these unwittingly led to the greatest overseas empire of all.

The Europeans had two great resources to assist them in building their empires.

The first was the sea itself. They could move safely across it, fearing no enemy except other Europeans, until they arrived at their destination. They could thus inflict on the rest of the world the turmoil which the Vikings had once inflicted on them. Their second resource was gunpowder. They alone had the secret of firearms, which gave them mastery over all other races. For more than 300 years firearms, not Christianity, guaranteed the predominance of European civilization.

The English had, in addition, a special resource which enabled them, in the long run, to win the race for empire. Though European in their origins and culture, they were detached from Europe geographically. England was an island and the English, when they were wise, could keep out of European conflicts. Europeans sometimes tried to invade England. None succeeded after William of Normandy in 1066. The English, on their side, did not seek European conquests after the Hundred Years War. Their last foothold, Calais, was lost in 1558. In later times, British statesmen pursued a European balance of power in their foreign policy. They kept the European powers in conflict as the guarantee of their own security and were thus free to expand their dominions overseas.

In the 18th Century the British eclipsed all their rivals. Spain was in decay. France was distracted by European ambitions and emerged from a long series of wars with Great Britain second best. The British Empire extended over North America. Another less formal empire was established in India, where the East India Company grew from a trading enterprise into the territorial overlord. The British motive in India was entirely economic. The British did not seek to impose their way of life on the inhabitants. They merely wanted peace and security in order to extract wealth and remit it to London.

North America, on the other hand, was an empire of settlement. The British there exterminated the native inhabitants to the best of their ability, just as they had earlier striven to exterminate the native inhabitants of Ireland. No empire has marched forward with more savagery. Although the home government often tried to stem the westward tide of settlement and to protect the Indians from settler depredations, the British in North America followed a simple rule: the only good Indian is a dead Indian. Indeed, this difference in attitude between the British government and the settlers was one of the causes of the American Revolution.

Why did the British overseas emulate Attila and his Huns? It is hard to answer. Perhaps their Protestant creed was peculiarly exclusive and intolerant – English Roman Catholics in America had a better record. Perhaps their comparative freedom from control by the home government enabled them to disregard the rules of civilized behaviour. Perhaps there is a simpler explanation: in the 18th Century the British merchants had a virtual monopoly of the slave-trade from Africa to America, and this brutalized them beyond redemption.

The British Empire of the 18th Century – the first British Empire as it was often called – was a straightforward institution of plunder. It was "a good thing" for those who profited from it and for no one else. No 18th-Century nabob, as the plunderers of India were called, pretended that he laboured for the benefit of the Indians. He laboured in order to become a millionaire.

Similarly, the British government in London did not claim to run the North American colonies for the benefit of the inhabitants, even though they were populated by those of British stock. The colonies existed in order to provide cheap raw materials and preferential markets for British goods. No doubt the North Americans believed that they were extending the British way of life as they saw it – gentry society in the South, Puritanism in the North – but this did not much concern the British government.

One aspect of the colonies, however, concerned the British governing class very much. As the colonies developed into settled communities, they had to be administered, and this meant public offices – "jobs for the boys," in the later phrase. All colonial posts, from that of governor down to customs officer, were reserved for the British aristocracy and its hangers-on. Needy noblemen were made governors. Subservient Members of Parliament were rewarded with colonial appointments for their relatives and dependents.

Much the same happened in India, where the administration, nominally still conducted by the East India Company, became a happy hunting ground for the British upper classes. Many a great nobleman added to his prestige, and, of course, to his wealth, by serving as Governor-General of India. Successful generals, and unsuccessful ones also, received high posts in India instead of pensions. Hilaire Belloc has immortalized the system in the famous lines:

We had intended you to be
The next Prime Minister but three:
The stocks were sold; the Press was squared;
The Middle Class was quite prepared.
But as it is! . . . My language fails!
Go out and govern New South Wales!

Here was a new factor in the drive for empire. The British Empire was increasingly run for the sake of those who ran it. Not all were in the game merely for the high salaries they received. Many welcomed greater power and openings for achievement than they could find in serving as rural magistrates or back-bench Members of Parliament at home. Some had an intellectual curiosity to explore the history or languages of India. Some were glad to escape from boredom. Whatever their motive, the administrators provided an imperial class. The Empire which provided them with jobs became for them a mission, a sacred duty.

As time passed, they came to believe that they were extending the virtues of British civilization, and their belief was not without foundation. What had begun as a trading venture turned into a moral cause. The administrators began to consider the interest of those over whom they ruled. They drew the line only at one point: they would do anything for the subject peoples except get off their backs.

The first British Empire of the 18th Century did not last long. The American colonies revolted against their exploitation. They wanted to run their own economy without restrictions and they

wanted to govern themselves. The Americans won their war of independence. The 13 colonies of the Atlantic seaboard became the United States of America. In time, American settlers spread right across the continent, carrying with them institutions and laws which had English origins. The loss of the American colonies did not do much damage except to the pride of George III and his ministers. Culturally and economically the United States remained a British dependency until the beginning of the 20th Century. Here was a great discovery, made theoretically by Adam Smith and reinforced practically by the loss of the American colonies: that political overlordship was not essential for economic profit and that, the straight pursuit of exploitation could, therefore, be laid aside.

Other developments contributed to the advance of this new outlook. For much of the 18th Century the West Indies was by far the most profitable part of the British Empire. William Beckford, the richest Englishman of his time, derived his entire wealth from Caribbean sugar-plantations, and he was only one among many. Towards the end of the century, however, the plantations showed signs of exhaustion from overcropping. Beckford's son was a symbol of this decline. With his vast wealth he built himself a gimcrack Gothic abbey. The tower fell down, and Beckford finished as an impoverished valetudinarian in Bath. Here then was further evidence that exploitation was providing diminishing returns.

Far more significant was the rapid change in English economic life itself. England had been a flourishing commercial country since the beginning of the 17th Century. She had excelled in trade, not manufactures. A hundred years later machines and factories had transformed England into the world's foremost industrial community. Some economists have conjectured that the capital necessary for this industrial expansion derived from the exploitation of Empire – primitive accumulation, as Marx called it. Other economists assert that the capital reserves had been gradually built up at home, and this is the prevailing view at the moment. Whether capitalists flourished by robbing other Englishmen or by plundering the rest of the world is a point of no great moment. They had to rob someone if they were to come into existence at all.

The development of British industry, which for a time made Great Britain the workshop of the world, was a striking, even if negative, event in the history of Empire. For the profits derived from coal and cotton, iron and steel seemed to make Empire unnecessary. British industry did not need protected markets. Free Trade, which triumphed with the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846, was implicitly a repudiation of empire. The British retained only a Free Trade Empire, which was almost a contradiction in terms. But not quite. The free trade which benefited the British was bestowed on the subject peoples, particularly of India, whether they liked it or not. In this high-principled way the Indian textile industry was made totally defenceless against that of Lancashire.

The Industrial Revolution, which made empire unnecessary in one way, stimulated it in another. For along with the growth of industry went a great increase in population. We do not know how closely the two developments were connected. Possibly the growth of industrial towns made better sanitation and health services essential. Possibly industrial workers, though miserably poor, were better fed than agricultural labourers. At any rate, the increased population was available for industry.

It was soon believed that there were too many people; both Australia and New Zealand originated as receptacles for this surplus population, Australia more specifically as one for criminals. This was a new feature in imperial expansion. Previously, men had gone to the colonies in search of gain. Now they went for space and, to some extent, for a freer life. The new steamships made emigration easy and cheap. In the mid-19th Century something like a quarter of a million people a year left Great Britain, the majority for the United States, but many for the developing British colonies.

In this way British communities, complete with British institutions, established themselves almost within a decade. The home government exercised little control over them. It had learned a lesson from the revolt of the American colonies. Canada was the first to receive "responsible government." New Zealand and the Australian colonies soon followed. This was an unprecedented development in the history of empires. For all practical purposes, the colonies with responsible government were no longer under the authority of London. They were bound to Great Britain only by ties of sentiment. Of course, they received practical advantages as well. The Royal Navy, paid for entirely by the British taxpayer, gave the colonies an effortless security until well on in the 20th Century.

Great Britain also offered a profitable market for colonial foodstuffs and raw materials. Later, the London capital market was opened to the colonies on advantageous terms. The balance-sheet of Empire was reversed. Throughout the 19th Century the British colonists benefited from the imperial connection, and Great Britain drew no great profit from it. The possession of an Empire brought prestige. It still provided agreeable jobs for the upper classes. But the British capitalists made most of their wealth by their own activities at home. Great Britain would have been no poorer, perhaps even a little richer, if the colonial Empire had not existed.

India was a different matter. Direct exploitation in the old plundering fashion came to an end. The 19th Century saw no more nabobs. The administrators became more powerful than the traders and also developed a new high-mindedness. There were two causes for this. The first was a change in political ethics. Corruption fell out of fashion. Public service took its place. Politicians no longer sought direct financial rewards from their activities, and the same spirit extended to administrators in India as well as at home. The second cause for this change was a revival in the British governing classes of Evangelical Christianity.

Victorian England was an intensely religious country. The British generals and administrators in India saw themselves as soldiers of God. Though they could not actually convert the Hindus and Muslims to Christianity, they could impose on India the Christian virtues. The British suppressed such practices as *suttee* – the burning of widows at their

husbands' funerals. They imposed a rigorously honest system of government. They began a laborious struggle against disease and famine. They ended the wars between the Indian states, usually by the simple process of annexation.

The rule of the Indian Civil Service brought great benefits to the Indian people. India was more peaceful and orderly, more fairly administered and better endowed with hospitals and railways than it could have been without British rule. But there was a heavy debit to be set on the other side. The more efficient and honest the British rulers of India became, the greater grew the cleavage between them and those over whom they ruled. The 18th-Century adventurers had not regarded the Indians as different from themselves. They spent many uninterrupted years in India, and it was a normal practice for them to marry Indian women. A servant of the East India Company who married a rajah's daughter would have thought himself in luck's way.

Now all was changed. The virtuous administrators of the 19th-Century Indian Civil Service regarded the Indians as inferior. Indians took bribes. They put the interest of their family before that of the state. They neglected the drains. They worshipped many gods of a most peculiar sort. The British administrators have been described by an admirer as Platonic Guardians. To a less enthusiastic eye they appear to be complacent prigs. After all, if they were so keen on improvement, there was plenty to improve in their own country without interfering in the affairs of a distant civilization which had done them no harm.

The Indian Civil Service provided the richest outlet for the products of the public-school system which was now flourishing in England. These so-called public schools – actually expensive private schools – grew up in order to provide the sons of the gentry and wealthy middle classes with what had previously been an aristocratic education. Those who passed through the public schools were known as "gentlemen." Unfortunately, having acquired a gentleman's culture and tastes, they also needed a gentleman's income. Where were they to acquire it? Certainly not by trade or industry, in which most English people made their livelihood.

The Indian Civil Service was the perfect answer. Its members, qualified mainly by their command of Latin and Greek, were safely immune from any taint of trade. They felt that they were discharging a religious mission. At the same time, they led the life of gentlemen, with households of 15 to 20 native servants. Retiring at an early age on a high pension, they returned to gentlemanly ease in England, with their sons following the same careers.

It is thus easy to decide who benefited from the Indian Empire. Its administration helped to perpetuate the English class system throughout the 19th Century. The benefit for British society is less obvious. The public schools were conservative institutions. Their outlook sapped the spirit of enterprise and invention which had carried Great Britain forward during the Industrial Revolution. As the 19th Century advanced there was increasing speculation about what was wrong with Great Britain. Why was her economic growth slowing down? Why did she not predominate in the new industries of electricity and chemicals as she had done in coal and cotton?

The simplest answer, which remains true to the present day, was the public schools. They taught the classics when they should have been teaching the sciences. They sustained outlooks unsuited to a progressive industrial community. And these in their turn were sustained by the Indian Empire.

The British rulers of India claimed to be there for the benefit of the Indians. In 1857 the Indians disputed that claim. The Indian Mutiny was the greatest challenge to the British Empire since the revolt of the American colonies. No doubt it was a rebellion in favour of ancient ways, not an explosion of modern nationalism. There were massacres on both sides. The British, in their alarm, were as savage as the mutineers. The Mutiny revealed the underlying truth about the Indian Empire: the British were not there because they were wanted, but because their troops had both superior discipline and superior weapons. Armed force was the fundamental resource of the British in India as it was for all other empires.

The Indian Mutiny completed the estrangement between the British and their Indian subjects. Henceforth the British ruled India as if it was another planet. Any idea of educating the Indians into self-government was postponed to an extremely remote future. India became the brightest jewel in the British crown and in 1876 formally an Empire. Queen Victoria became Empress of India – an imperial title never taken for any other of her Dominions.

It was in this period that India brought most profit to Great Britain. Internal peace made India a rich market. Lancashire continued to prosper with the Indian demand for cotton goods. India brought also great advantages in power. The Indian Army, paid for by Indian taxes but officered by Englishmen, provided Great Britain with military resources. Many of the later imperial conquests were made by Indian troops serving overseas in Africa or the Persian Gulf. In addition, about half of the British Army was regularly stationed in India, again at Indian expense. Altogether the Indian Empire was a wonderful device for maintaining armed forces on the cheap.

Until the end of the 1890s the British Empire was the only one of its kind in the world. The Spanish Empire in America had been lost. The Portuguese and Dutch Empires were remnants, though the Dutch was a very profitable one. The French Empire was also not much more than a collection of relics except in North Africa. The British Empire, however, encompassed the globe. The white communities were growing in population and resources. British control of India seemed unshakable. All this rested essentially on the British command of the seas. Though there were occasional alarms, the Royal Navy was never seriously challenged between the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 and the building of a great German navy in the early 20th Century. Seapower was the key to empire.

A new epoch opened in the 1880s. Other European powers began to covet colonies and turned to Africa, the one continent that had not been seriously penetrated by Europeans. Curiously, Belgium, by no means a great power, started

the race when Leopold II set out to acquire the Congo basin as an individual venture. France, Germany and even Italy soon joined in. The British would have preferred to leave Africa alone and acquired vast African territories mainly to keep others out. There was also a strategic motive. The British now controlled the Suez Canal as their route to India and extended their rule over much of Africa in order to make this control more secure.

The imperialism of the late 19th Century has been much discussed by historians. It had many causes, not all of them political. Explorers were eager to chart the Dark Continent and often used patriotic motives as an excuse for purely academic curiosity. Christian missionaries wished to rescue the Africans from paganism. Philanthropists wished to end the Arab slave-trade. Empire became a demagogic cry, if only to divert the working classes from their economic and social grievances at home.

On a more practical basis, colonies were supposed to offer profitable markets as they had done in the 18th Century. More than this, they were supposed to offer profitable openings for investment. According to an ingenious view, first propounded by the English economist, J.A. Hobson, and then taken up by Lenin, the yield on capital was diminishing at home as industries became fully developed and production outstripped demand. Investment in the undeveloped colonies provided what Lenin called "super-profit." Hence the motive behind imperial expansion was the old search for wealth.

This view has been sharply discredited in recent years. It has been clearly shown, for instance, that the direct connection between overseas investment and the new imperialism, as laid down by Hobson and Lenin, has been grossly exaggerated. British overseas investment certainly increased greatly at this time, but most of it went to South America, the United States and other independent countries, not to the newly-acquired African colonies. Few of these colonies indeed "paid" the countries which acquired them.

The annual cost to Germany of adminstering the Cameroons was five times as great as her total trade with the colony, and much the same applied to other countries. Nor is there any clear evidence that the yield from colonial investments was higher than that from investment at home. On the contrary, the dabbler in overseas shares was far likelier to lose his money. In almost every case, European countries spent a great deal of money in acquiring colonies which proved of little economic value.

These arguments, though true, are also irrelevant. They treat European countries as communities in which policies were conducted for the benefit of all, much as companies are conducted, or are supposed to be, for the benefit of the shareholders. This was not so. Benefit went to the few who determined policy and shaped public opinion; it was of no concern to them that this was achieved at great loss to the many. James Thurber, the American comic artist, drew extremely ugly women. When told that his women were not attractive, he replied: "They are to my men." Similarly, when we are told that imperialism was not profitable, we can reply: "It was to the imperialists." The humble investor might lose his money, but the mighty company promoter did not go away empty-handed even if the company he promoted went bankrupt.

Overseas railways often did not pay those who invested money in them, but they paid those who built them and those who peddled the shares. The Boer War cost the British taxpayer a great deal of money, but South Africa also produced many millionaires. In Edwardian times these millionaires occupied most of the houses in Park Lane. Clearly, imperialism brought economic gain to some people, if not to the imaginary national community, and the lucky few could hire journalists and historians to bamboozle the many.

Economic imperialism was a striking example of conspicuous waste, the doctrine laid down by Thorstein Veblen. According to Veblen, capitalism needs a steady increase in expenditure to keep going, and the great problem is to find new excuses for spending money. Imperialism was a splendid way of doing it. If some great nobleman had offered to stay at home instead of becoming Viceroy of India on condition that he was given a rise in the peerage and £200,000, this would have been an excellent bargain for the British taxpayer. But, of course, no one considered it, and the nobleman duly went to India. James Mill said early in the 19th Century that the Empire was a system of out-relief for the British aristocracy. By the end of the century it had become a system of out-relief for British capitalists also.

Economic imperialism did not last long as the predominant tone. The First World War again changed the spirit of British imperialism. The supposed strategical danger from the German colonies revived Britain's desire to lay hands on more of the world for herself, and at the end of the war this desire was strengthened by a new alarm over Bolshevik Russia. The British Empire acquired a new empire in the Middle East, stretching from Egypt to India, to serve as a barrier against Russia.

There was also a change in a different direction. Germany was deprived of her colonies on the excuse that she had ruled them brutally. The British acquisitions in Africa and Asia were disguised as "mandates," allegedly administered for the good of their inhabitants. The British had to be on their best behaviour. Often they took their high professions seriously.

Yet, at this late stage of empire, the British reverted to old ideas of direct exploitation. Free Trade no longer brought automatic prosperity and in 1932 Great Britain reverted to Protection. Lord Beaverbrook preached Empire Free Trade – in reality, an economic system closed against foreigners – and an attempt was made to realize this at the Ottawa Conference. The self-governing Dominions would not accept it. The colonies administered from Whitehall had no choice. In the years before the Second World War these colonies became protected markets for British goods exactly as the American colonies had been in the days of mercantilism. This brought no benefits to the colonies, and most economists now hold that it also brought none to Great Britain. Her principal competitors, the Japanese and the Germans, being excluded from the colonies, merely became fiercer rivals elsewhere.

There was a deeper underlying change. In 1922 Ireland, the oldest of British colonies, won her freedom. She did so by

rebellion, not by conciliation and consent. The Sinn Feiners succeeded where the parliamentary Home Rule party had failed. This was an example for other colonial peoples. In India especially the party of independence, led by Gandhi, moved from conciliation to resistance even though on Gandhi's insistence this was non-violent.

The British were challenged at their most vulnerable point. They had held their Empire by the possession of superior force. Now the balance of strength was turning against them. During the inter-war years they were still strong enough to retain their hold on India and only made concessions which involved no surrender of power. But they were increasingly strained by the mounting challenge from Germany and Japan. In 1939, and then more decisively in 1941, they were again plunged into war.

Though the British entered the war in order to destroy Nazi tyranny in Europe, it became, in effect, mainly an imperial venture. Britain fought Germany and Italy in North Africa and the Mediterranean. She fought Japan on the eastern borders of India. Paradoxically, she fought this war for the sake of an Empire which she had already decided to relinquish. The Indians were offered their freedom if they would wait until the end of the war and, though they refused the offer, they got this freedom afterwards all the same. Withdrawal from India was really the end of the British Empire. It had been the central focus of the whole system and, once it went, there was little point in hanging on to the rest.

It took the British some 15 years to appreciate this. Then, in the early 1960s, the British colonial Empire vanished overnight. The British maintained that they were no longer strong enough to maintain their Empire. It would be truer to say that they no longer believed in it. There is no explaining a loss of belief of this kind. It happened. One day the British believed that they were a great people because they had an Empire. The next day they regarded the Empire as a worthless burden and discarded it without further thought.

Imperial collapse had an unnecessary and unfortunate accompaniment. The colonies and the Dominions really had little in common, though they were lumped together as British. The Dominions were independent communities, associated with Great Britain by their own free will. As such they were the only allies of Great Britain who went through both world wars with her from the first day to the last. They imposed no conditions. They asked no reward. They responded instinctively to the call of their kith and kin – a phrase now discarded as ridiculously sentimental, but once full of meaning. Commonwealth aid in wartime was economic as well as financial. The United States demanded hard terms when they provided Lend-Lease. Canada gave Mutual Aid unconditionally. Here was the living reality of Commonwealth feeling.

Yet nothing was made of it. Once the Second World War was over, British opinion turned against the Commonwealth as much as it did against the Empire. Admittedly, the Royal Navy could no longer provide the effortless security which the Dominions had received in the 19th Century, and Australia, for one, turned to the United States for military protection. Admittedly, too, there were elements, such as the French in Canada and the Boers in South Africa, who did not feel the tie with Britain. But essentially the Commonwealth was a union of hearts, not a union of interests. The British political leaders deliberately threw it away. By the 1960s Commonwealth citizens, as much British as the inhabitants of Lancashire, were denied free entry into their own home. The Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962 was the real end of Empire.

There is a curious posthumous relic. The British no longer have an Empire; but in one important way they behave as though they had. Only two countries maintain expensive military establishments outside their own territory. One is the United States, which spends well over £1,000 million a year in foreign currencies. The Americans now regard themselves as one of the two remaining imperial powers in the world and presumably know what they are doing. Great Britain spends £300 million a year in foreign currency for the defence of an Empire which no longer exists. No other country does this. Germany and Japan actually make a profit out of being defended by others. Nor did the defence of the British Empire cost anything in foreign currency before the Second World War. It showed a profit, thanks to some £200 million levied on the people of India.

Were it not for this persistence in spending foreign exchange on military purposes there would never have been a balance of payments problem in the British economy, and everyone in Great Britain would have been remarkably the richer as a result. We may debate interminably whether the possession of Empire ever showed a profit to the national community. Continuance of imperial habits when there is no Empire certainly produces a considerable loss. But such debate is pointless. The British Empire was run for the sake of those who administered it, defended it and speculated in it. No doubt the non-existent Empire brings similar advantages, in prestige if not in profit, to those who run it now.

There remains a final question. Did the British Empire benefit its former subject peoples? There is no simple answer. The Empire carried British institutions overseas in the Dominions and made Africans and Indians, at least superficially, European in their ethics, politics and customs. If European civilization in its British guise be accepted as superior to African and Asian, then the British Empire was clearly a good thing. It all depends on the point of view. Anyone who regards industrialization and pollution and nuclear weapons as evil may regret that they are now spread throughout the world. That is what the British Empire helped to do.

Perhaps the subject peoples would have found a way of life more suited to their needs if they had been left to themselves. They were given no choice. For that matter, the Japanese have been the most successful imitators of Europe without any imperial assistance. The British thought that they were discharging a mission of civilization. Their real mission was to extract profit for themselves, and it is not certain that they managed to do even that particularly successfully.

Officer, 4th Royal Irish Dragoon Guards, 1856